

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074  
MINORITY (202) 225-5051  
<https://oversight.house.gov>

September 15, 2023

The Honorable Deanne Criswell  
Administrator Federal Emergency Management Agency  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
500 C Street SW  
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Criswell:

On August 10, the Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce held a hearing on the state of Federal disaster recovery to Hurricane Ian, which struck southwest Florida in September 2022. Two days prior to the hearing, wildfires destroyed the town of Lahaina, Hawaii. The purpose of the hearing in Ft. Myers was to discuss ongoing needs of the communities in southwest Florida, as well as highlight areas for improvement in the wake of future disasters. We therefore write to highlight certain issues that arose during the hearing and inquire as to what steps are being taken to address them in Hawaii. We also seek information regarding FEMA's response generally to the wildfires on Maui.

According to media reports and briefings from FEMA staff, numerous federal employees are now in Hawaii to assist survivors and the community.<sup>1</sup> While we are grateful for their service, the experience in Florida suggested that at times, deployed workers lacked sufficient knowledge to assist applicants or lacked the authority to make decisions. Residents expressed frustration after waiting in line for considerable periods of time only to be given a number and told to call a different FEMA official.<sup>2</sup> In other instances, they had been instructed to provide certain documentation, only to be told still more information would be required in order to receive benefits.<sup>3</sup> We appreciate and share the desire to protect taxpayer interests, but we also encourage FEMA to streamline processes to the extent possible.

With respect to housing, numerous homes in southwest Florida were destroyed or otherwise rendered uninhabitable as a result of Hurricane Ian. The 2021 Threat and Hazard

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<sup>1</sup> David Vergun, DOD, FEMA Fully Engaged in Maui Recovery and Assistance Efforts, Defense.gov, August 18, 2023, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3498485/dod-fema-fully-engaged-in-maui-recovery-and-assistance-efforts/>

<sup>2</sup> *Weathering the Storm: Oversight of the Federal Response and Recovery Efforts in Southwestern Florida following Hurricane Ian Before the Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce*, 118<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2023) (statement of Mr. Chauncey Goss), available at <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Goss-Statement-Govt-Oversight.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Id.

Identification and Risk Assessment for Hawaii mentions the availability of temporary housing options as a concern.<sup>4</sup> It is important to understand the options for housing – whether there are sufficient hotel rooms and temporary options available or whether residents may be forced to relocate to the mainland or other islands. One particular source of frustration in Florida involved the ability to acquire a trailer from FEMA.<sup>5</sup> It is unclear to us whether trailers are an option on Maui. If so, we point out that in Florida, residents were initially given to understand they would be able to utilize a FEMA-provided trailer on their property.<sup>6</sup> After significant delays, however, they were informed that a FEMA trailer would not be an option since their property was in an area susceptible to flooding in the event of another storm.<sup>7</sup> While FEMA’s rationale was not without merit, it is yet unclear why residents were led to believe they would be able to use a trailer in the first place; at the very least, it showed a lack of clear guidance and communication.

Finally, recent reporting has highlighted FEMA employees staying at luxury hotels and resorts.<sup>8</sup> In speaking to FEMA staff, Committee staff were told it was necessary to temporarily house FEMA employees in such locations so they could be close enough to Lahaina to effectively perform their duties. Committee staff were also told FEMA paid government rates at such locations, so the amount per night was likely less was being reported in media accounts. Nevertheless, it is important to understand FEMA’s plans to house federal workers as the response and recovery move forward.

In order to assist the Committee in conducting oversight of FEMA’s response to the Lahaina fire, please answer the following questions in writing as soon as possible but not later than September 29, 2023:

1. What have the State of Hawaii and local officials requested in terms of federal support? Have these requests been filled, and how long did it take to fill them? If FEMA has not been able to fill such requests, what is the reason?
2. What has FEMA tasked other federal agencies with providing, in terms of aid or services? Have such agencies complied with such requests? If not, why not? If they have complied with such requests, were they able to do so in a timely manner?

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<sup>4</sup> Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment at 49, (2021), available at <https://dod.hawaii.gov/hiema/files/2023/01/21-1227-Threat-and-Hazard-Identification-and-Risk-Assessment-1.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 2

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

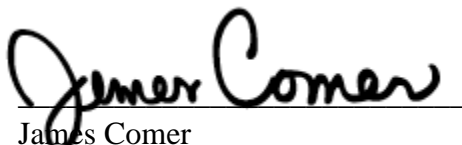
<sup>8</sup> James Franey. FEMA officials are staying at \$1,000-a-night luxury hotels in Maui amid recovery efforts in Lahaina, Daily Mail, August 23, 2023, available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12430203/FEMA-officials-staying-luxury-Maui-hotels.html>

3. If not addressed in the responses to the previous two questions, please provide information describing difficulties provided requested support.
4. Please describe the situation regarding shelter and temporary housing for displaced residents. How many people are currently receiving housing-related assistance as a result of the wildfires? Are all those needing housing-related assistance receiving it? Are there sufficient options in proximity to the affected area, or are residents having to relocate significant distances to find housing?
5. Please address concerns raised by media reports of federal workers staying in luxury hotels on Maui subsequent to the wildfires on Maui. What were the circumstances around these reports? Please provide the rates paid for accommodations and any variance from government rates. In instances where a rate higher than the government rate was paid, please provide the rationale.
6. Please describe the long-term plan for housing federal relief workers on Maui.
7. Does FEMA plan on providing trailers as a possible housing option? If so, what are potential obstacles or barriers to property owners placing such trailers on their property?
8. Please describe any challenges residents are experiencing applying for or qualifying for assistance and the steps taken to minimize such challenges.

To arrange for the delivery of responsive documents or ask any related follow-up questions, please contact Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority Staff at (202) 225-5074. Attached are instructions for producing the documents and information to the Committee.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



James Comer

Chairman

House Committee on Oversight and  
Accountability



Pete Sessions

Chairman

Subcommittee on Government  
Operations and the Federal  
Workforce



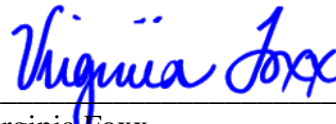
Glenn Grothman  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on National Security,  
the Border, and Foreign Affairs



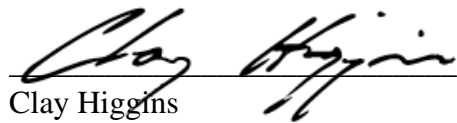
Nancy Mace  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Cybersecurity,  
Information Technology, and  
Government Innovation



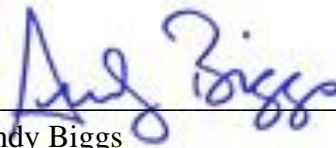
Lisa McClain  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Health Care and  
Financial Services



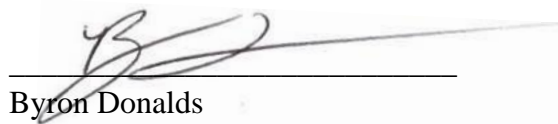
Virginia Foxx  
Member of Congress



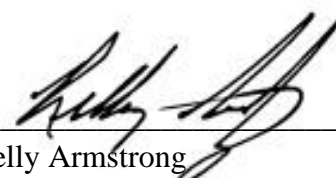
Clay Higgins  
Member of Congress



Andy Biggs  
Member of Congress



Byron Donalds  
Member of Congress



Kelly Armstrong  
Member of Congress



Tim Burchett  
Member of Congress

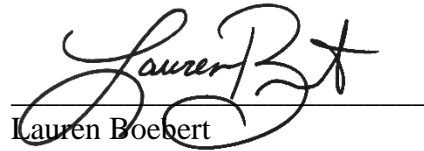


Marjorie Taylor Greene  
Member of Congress

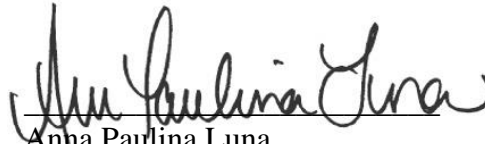
The Honorable Deanne Criswell

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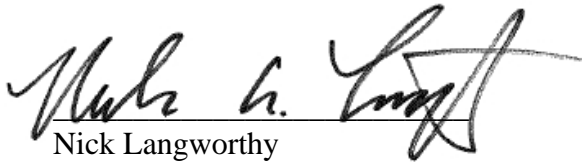
Page 5 of 5



Lauren Boebert  
Member of Congress



Anna Paulina Luna  
Member of Congress



Nick Langworthy  
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Accountability

The Honorable Kweisi Mfume, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce

The Honorable Robert Garcia, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs

The Honorable Gerald Connolly, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation

The Honorable Katie Porter, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services