

Toward Just Disaster Response in the United States and US Territories

Considering a Green New Deal approach to disaster in the wake of Hurricanes Ian and Fiona in 2022

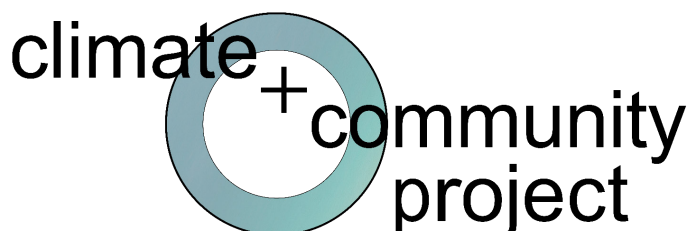
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“ **A Green New Deal approach to disaster response delivers justice for those most affected by disaster, good jobs to rebuild stronger communities, and decarbonization to limit warming and stop as much disaster as possible.** ”



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2022 hurricane season exposes the trend of increasing extreme weather due to the climate crisis. Scientists cataloged six named storms, four hurricanes and two major hurricanes. Hurricane Fiona doused Puerto Rico in 30 inches of rain and took out the island’s entire grid. Hurricane Ian barreled down the west coast of Florida, wiping out roads and ripping roofs off houses. This will not be the last season of destructive hurricanes— in years to come, experts predict that hurricanes will get worse.¹ The climate crisis will also increase the likelihood of other extreme weather patterns like wildfires, drought, heat waves, and cold snaps.

- **The United States’ disaster response is woefully inadequate.** An underfunded, reactive emergency structure has left people without support or excluded by official responses. It has allowed companies to swoop in and privatize rebuilding, ultimately securing companies’ control over critical infrastructure.
- **Climate disaster is a racial and social justice issue.** Working class communities of color, incarcerated people, unhoused people, elderly people, people who can’t afford to evacuate or already face housing instability, and undocumented people face compounded crises during disaster. To date, disaster response has entrenched injustices instead of alleviating them.
- **Disaster is not just acute— it is chronic.** It affects the long-term health and wellbeing of communities. With little to no support, communities suffer from physical and mental health problems, cycles of debt and homelessness, and job loss.
- **Disasters will only get worse without decarbonization.** The best defense is a good offense. However, the United States has failed to respond at the scale of the crisis.

Intensifying extreme weather requires the United States to take a Green New Deal approach to disaster response. In other words, the United States should invest in a comprehensive program that delivers justice for those most affected by disaster, good jobs to rebuild stronger communities, and decarbonization to limit warming and stop as much disaster as possible. A Green New Deal approach to disaster response requires an undoing of the status quo logic that relies on polic-

ing to manage disaster and aims to restore ‘business as usual’ for the white and wealthy. In its place, the state should prepare community capacity for future disasters and tackle structural inequities that impose disproportionate harm on certain communities.

In this memo, we outline some key ways that policy makers could advance a Green New Deal-style approach to disaster. We focus on redirecting existing disaster infrastructure away from harmful practices and building new infrastructure to remediate the experience of disaster:

IMMEDIATE TERM

- **Decriminalize Disaster.** Civilian or community response teams should be prioritized over police to respond to emergencies.
- **Remove Barriers to Assistance.** Ensure receiving aid is as straightforward and transparent as possible, and that unhoused, immigrant, and incarcerated people receive the help they need to get out of harm’s way.
- **Ensure Worker Safety.** Workers who are not part of emergency work should not be forced to choose between evacuation and their job.

MEDIUM TERM

- **Care for Community Health.** Care—including physical health, reproductive health, mental health, and gender-based violence reduction—should be made accessible in the aftermath of disaster, and plans for continued care should be set ahead of crises.
- **Stop Privatization and Support Workers.** Invest in public and community capacity instead of privatizing public services or contracting out recovery. Prioritize local workers for jobs for rebuilding, and set up long-term pathways for high-roads work.

- **Invest in Community Planning.** Collective approaches to risk management and mitigation where people live and work will lead to more effective disaster planning, allowing for discussion of risks like gentrification and applying strategies that incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge.
- **Rebuild Better.** Rebuild houses and buildings so they are efficient and more able to weather storms. This includes increasing building efficiency and investing in rooftop solar and storage infrastructure to help keep the lights on during the next disaster. This also includes building social infrastructure for disaster preparedness.

LONG TERM

- **End the Fossil Fuel Economy.** Every bit of warming stopped will limit future destruction, death, and disaster. This means the US needs to invest in comprehensive, rapid decarbonization of the economy. Fossil fuel infrastructure pollutes even more during disasters and needs to be dismantled.
- **Stop Development in Disaster or Risk Areas.** Governments need to build a plan to stop development and move people out of high risk areas. This may include buying out homes and building and supporting relocation in ways that do not re-entrench gentrification, redlining, or other forms of discrimination.
- **Ensure Fiscal Justice.** The federal government should support governments, especially for Black and majority-minority jurisdictions, who are hurting from the compounding costs of disaster recovery and lost economic activity.

Climate disasters are not natural. Climate disasters are a culmination of delayed response to the climate crisis, structural inequality, and the hollowing out of the US government. Communities are calling for action, and disaster response policies should respond at the scale of the crisis.

CLIMATE AND COMMUNITY PROJECT

is a progressive climate policy think tank that mobilizes a network of leading academic and movement researchers in developing cutting-edge research at the climate-inequality nexus. We’ve produced multiple reports alongside movement and political partners including the [Green New Deal for Public Schools](#), [A New Era of Public Power](#), and [High Roads to Resilience](#).

MEMO

Hurricane Ian pushed thousands of people into evacuation, put houses underwater, and damaged parts of the electrical grid “beyond repair” on the Gulf coast of Florida, and along the East Coast. This came just nine days after Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico, bringing catastrophic flooding and knocking out all of the electricity to the island on the fifth anniversary of the devastating Hurricane Maria. Disasters are increasing in both frequency and intensity.

When disaster strikes, social factors like health, wealth, mobility, and marginalization make some communities—particularly working class communities of color, incarcerated people, unhoused people, elderly people, people who can’t afford to evacuate or already face housing instability, and undocumented people—more vulnerable than wealthier and often whiter communities. Systems like racism, capitalism, and anti-Indigeneity block access to protections from extreme weather events. There is a need now more than ever to establish disaster responses that provide high-trust, low-barrier recoveries instead of disaster capitalism and displacement.

The United States needs to take a Green New Deal-style approach to disaster response to deliver the immediate needs of whole communities in the aftermath of disaster, remove vulnerabilities that increase the severity of disasters, and provide interventions for ‘transformative adaptation’ in the long term.¹

Below we describe some key aspects of a Green New Deal for Disaster Response. These interventions are divided into those that can be made in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, during the cleanup, and through long-term planning and reforms. The list below is not comprehensive, but identifies key pathways for action.

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Immediate Action (0-1 month)

While much of an improved disaster response requires big, structural changes that reduce vulnerability in the long term, there are ways to support communities on the frontlines of disaster during and immediately following.

- **Decriminalize disaster response.** Dispatching armed police officers in emergencies is not only resource ineffective, it can result in disproportionate harm to BIPOC people, unhoused people, people with behavioral disorders, and other groups disproportionately vulnerable to state violence. In the aftermath of disasters, police unnecessarily criminalize survivors seeking to meet their immediate needs, like shelter or food. This often funnels poor or unhoused people into incarceration instead of giving them the support to survive. Just responses should end the enforcement of quality-of-life ordinances before, during, and after disasters. Civilian or community response teams should be prioritized over police and carceral responses.
- **Expand coverage of disaster related expenses.** Expand qualification for Individual Assistance to ensure receiving aid is as straightforward and transparent as possible to reduce burdens on people already dealing with the financial and psychological difficulties of surviving disasters.² The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) should expand reimbursement coverage to include expenses incurred during disaster, including buying food, supplies for emergency kits, and the costs of evacuating.
- **Remove barriers to government assistance programs.** No assistance program should be inaccessible due to class, race, language, migration status, access to technology, or long wait times.³ All disaster aid, from FEMA to mutual aid, must be uncoupled from citizenship status, including the requirement of documentation and IDs.
- **Ensure worker safety.** Workers who are not part of emergency work should not be forced to choose between evacuation and their job. Pass the Worker Safety in Climate Disasters Act, which would allow two weeks of emergency paid leave for workers who are unable to work during disasters due to transit disruptions, personal injuries or emergencies, school closures, or forced evacuation.⁴
- **Employ plans for hazard mitigation and evacuation for incarcerated people.** Community plans rarely mention the prisons and jails, leaving emergency planning for incarcerated folks under the purview of prison officials.⁵ Prisons are often located in particularly high-risk locations—incarcerated people should be evacuated during disasters, not abandoned or forced to work.^{6,7}

Medium Term Vision (2-12 Months)

As residents return to damaged, flooded, and moldy homes and communities, the work of rebuilding begins. A just post-disaster recovery should center the needs of people who were most severely affected, ensure accountability and transparency at each step, and build community capacity and power in the process.

- **Care for community health.** Hospitals, long-term care facilities including nursing homes, community health centers, and pharmacies all play critical roles during and after disasters. In addition to physical trauma, disaster can have adverse mental health consequences that disproportionately affect women, BIPOC people, poorer people, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions.^{8,9} Furthermore, gender-based violence increases after extreme events.¹⁰ Disabled people are also disproportionately impacted by disaster, but largely remain sidelined in planning, during crisis, and in disaster's aftermath.¹¹ Health centers should develop Continuity of Operation Plans that are inclusive of reproductive health, mental health, and gender-based violence reduction.
- **Invest in community planning and preparedness.** The United States underfunds risk data like climate modeling as well as qualitative risk appraisal that can be crucial for disaster planning and real-time response. Research support should be scaled up, apply an interdisciplinary approach, and share results with communities in a way that can be easily understood. This way, research can be used for community planning and disaster preparedness. Disaster planning should integrate communities' experiences of risks, displacement pressures, and precarity-- including pre-existing pressures like gentrification, often racialized, which can compound the harms of extreme events like coastal storms.¹² Community planning should include capacity building activities that allow all involved to understand each other and develop trust and a common foundation; it is particularly crucial for federal or government employees to value this community-based approach. Programs should meaningfully solicit, incorporate, and deploy Traditional Ecological Knowledge into planning and hazards preparation policy. Community preparedness should also create a culture of continuous improvement to enable constant assessment and evaluation.
- **Stave off privatization and support public control over goods and services.** As communities reel from the effects of disaster, corporations have been known to swoop in and privatize rebuilding, ultimately securing control over critical infrastructure. For instance, LUMA (a private energy company) now runs Puerto Rico's electrical grid post-Hurricane Maria via a "public-private partnership" with the public utility, PREPA.¹³ However, privatization hasn't brought renewables or reliability, but a full-island outage from a much smaller storm.

Meanwhile, other private utilities have helped cause disaster through underinvestment, under-maintenance and bad management, as in the case of PG&E and a string of disastrous wildfires in California.¹⁴ Local, state, and federal jurisdictions should instead invest in public services and partner with community-based groups that have already built on-the-ground capacity and relationships with people. Government should reconsider private ownership over critical public goods like water, energy, schools, and waste management-- all of which are public assets that have been sold off in the wake of disasters in US states and cities over the last 20 years.^{15,16} We should be explicit that government entities have produced historic harm through their disaster practices. Building state capacity for disaster requires both the retention of public infrastructure, as well as redirecting responses toward more productive and justice-centered approaches.

- **Invest in local workers to rebuild.** Ensure workers are employed at sustaining wages to rebuild their home communities. In addition to pushing for prevailing wage standards, unions should push for community benefits agreements that guarantee jobs for local residents and prioritize members of frontline, low-income, and BIPOC communities. Pre-apprenticeship programs can help ensure that local residents have pathways to long-term union employment. At the federal level, there is an urgent need for the protections included in the Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act), which would significantly increase penalties against employers for illegal union-busting, lower the barriers for workers to secure collective bargaining agreements, and ban Right-to-Work laws, among other significant changes. The federal government needs to increase its funding for disaster and adaptation so that it can cover high-roads worker standards, move beyond spot fixes, and help everyone as compared to the richest voices.
- **Integrate resilient energy systems.** When the lights went out in Puerto Rico during Hurricane Fiona, residents who had solar and storage systems were able to keep the lights on. However, too often distributed renewable energy systems like rooftop solar or energy efficiency assets like heat pumps are only accessible to middle to high income homeowners. The federal government should invest substantial funds in distributed energy and energy efficiency programs post-disaster, and make sure that those funds are made available in ways that do not compound household debt burdens and economic precarity.¹⁷

Investments should prioritize working class communities who are shut out of complicated rebate systems for homeowners that rely on big up-front investments, or who cannot access these programs at all because they rent their homes. A focus on vulnerable,

last-to-be-restored communities both shortens overall blackout times, and brings justice to communities usually left behind. Investment will not only increase resilience amidst disaster and prepare better against future extreme weather, but also contribute to decarbonization.

- **Build pathways out of precarious housing.** Instead of funneling people back into damaged, unstable housing where they are exposed to future environmental shocks and environmental health harms, progress must be made to support communities to rehome or relocate. For example, the millions of US households living in manufactured homes bear outsized disaster and extreme temperature exposures as climate risks increase, but since this housing is economically and culturally devalued, these residents often have limited options if their house is destroyed.^{18,19} We propose federal buyouts of destroyed or damaged houses and buildings post-disaster in high-risk areas and support for short-term rehousing systems. This federal action should be paired with a build out of public and affordable housing systems that support socially- and culturally-cognizant rehousing that builds on existing legislation for a Green New Deal for Public Housing.²⁰

Long Term Vision (12+ Months)

As disasters become more intense, frequent, and erratic, investments in mitigation and adapted infrastructure are necessary to protect against increasing devastation and loss. A study of federal hazard mitigation grants disseminated over 23 years showed that each dollar spent on hazard mitigation saved an average of six dollars in relief and recovery costs.²¹ Despite these clear wins for both affected communities and government funding capacities in planning ahead, FEMA has historically underfunded mitigation and prevention activities in favor of reactionary recovery funding— spending more in emergencies to do less good.²² This acute and counterproductive underfunding mirrors broader disinvestment, austerity, and abandonment of state capacity and communities alike; rebuilding each will be critical to improving disaster preparedness and recovery in a warming world.

- **End the fossil fuel economy.** Every degree of warming stopped will lower the frequency and severity of future disasters, as well as save countless lives, species, and ecosystems. To achieve the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s target of 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, emissions need to be halved by 2030 and no new fossil fuels can be developed.²³ Achieving that goal necessitates shifting energy systems to renewable energy and decarbonizing homes, buildings, and transportation. It also means explicitly winding down polluting fossil fuel infrastructure.

The benefits are not just limiting the global climate crisis, but are critical to stopping local pollution. For

example, during Hurricane Ida in Louisiana, the NOAA detected 55 oil and gas spills, including near a fragile nature reserve.²⁴ Often, frontline communities located near fossil fuel infrastructure experience a “second storm” of toxic air, poisoned water, and chemical fires.²⁵ Ending the production and use of fossil fuels in the United States and abroad will help limit the amount of warming and associated climate disasters.

- **Create community resilience centers for disaster.** During Winter Storm Uri, low income and nonwhite communities experienced longer times without electricity in part because of their lack of proximity to “critical infrastructure” like hospitals that were prioritized in restoring electricity.²⁶ This is largely due to histories of redlining or gentrification that have pushed them away from community assets. Furthermore, police stations are regularly used as hubs of information despite being unsafe places for marginalized community members. Communities should receive funding to plan, equip, and manage community resilience centers where they will feel safe— in places like schools, libraries, or local grocery stores— and pre-existing community-organized disaster response teams should be looped into disaster response teams.
- **Create long-term institutions for building just restoration, repair, recovery, remediation workforces.** A new orientation toward disaster risk reduction and equitable recovery offers an opportunity to bolster policy for a just transition for workers from harmful or polluting industries, and, given the magnitude of the challenges, to ensure meaningful work for anyone who wants it. New federal job programs should be aligned with short and medium term workforce priorities while linking to longer term job (re)definition, training, and institutionalization through programs like the Civilian Climate Corps (CCC). Criteria should ensure jobs created are high-quality jobs, including sustainability for people and the environment, place-based job creation, local hiring, and stability. When assured together, these elements allow workers and their communities to thrive.
- **Stop development in disaster or risk areas.** There are areas that should not be developed in a warming world, and some communities in high risk areas will require a managed retreat. Real estate developers in states like Florida wield enormous political power and have stopped policies that they saw as constricting or expensive; as a result, many communities are directly in harm’s way following overdevelopment in some of the riskiest places.²⁷ At the same time, extreme weather-resilient neighborhoods are becoming more appealing to homebuyers, pushing low-income and minority communities into more precarious housing— driving climate gentrification.²⁸ Federal, state, and local governments need to build a robust managed retreat program in coordination with local planners, community members, and natural/

social scientists that buys out communities in high-risk areas, especially those that governments have directly subsidized to encourage growth. Managed retreat must not re-entrench systemic racism or create new forms of uprooting and displacing BIPOC communities—consultation and consent should be guiding principles. Managed retreat should coincide with abundant, high-quality, resilient, and attractive new social and public housing infrastructure in safe environments.

- **Recreate the National Flood Insurance Programs (NFIP).** The NFIP is a FEMA program that provides flood insurance largely to property owners. Flood insurance rates are based on maps that evaluate the risk of floods in communities. Right now the NFIP has a narrow focus on protecting existing homeowners threatened by climate risks and devaluation. However, the cost of flood insurance and necessary changes to houses can be costly to families, or force them to relocate without support. NFIP should be funded and transformatively scaled up— or replaced with an entirely new program— with a more ambitious mission that enables a coordinated managed retreat strategy for those living in the highest risk places.²⁹ A new program should transfer risk from individual households to the state and enable a larger rethinking of how insurance is provided.
- **Ensure fiscal justice, especially for Black and minority-majority jurisdictions.** The federal government should relieve municipal debt burdens that are likely to become unbearable for many urban governments because of the compounded direct costs of disaster recovery and lingering lost economic activity. This federal aid is crucial as climate impacts become more pronounced. Rising impacts threaten to depress property tax bases as more homes and businesses lose property value, become ‘uninsurable’ if private insurers pull out of high-risk cities, and are increasingly unable to secure mortgages— potentially causing the homes and business properties to become physically uninhabitable and unusable.³⁰

Meanwhile, existing urban infrastructure like road networks and bridges may become prematurely unusable under climate threats despite cities continuing to bear the burden of repaying debt taken out to build them.³¹ These property tax write-downs and lost revenue streams threaten urban governments’ financial stability in cross-cutting ways, even as they must spend more on disaster recovery and preparedness.³²

- **Design and deploy equitable, cost-effective financial mechanisms for resilience investments.** Mitigation and disaster preparedness require investment. The deployment of funding or other financial mechanisms should contribute to rescaling how disaster preparedness and climate crisis adaptation infrastructures are paid for. Much of the responsibility for funding and financing disaster risk reduction is currently devolved to individual urban governments already experiencing growing fiscal strains due to the climate crisis. This down-scaling of responsibility means that many financially precarious urban governments foot the bill for expensive repairs to climate-exposed infrastructures like stormwater systems, including to meet federal mandates for long standing problems like combined sewage overflow. In the process, they are forced to rely on private municipal bond markets which are increasingly making poorer, climate-vulnerable cities pay more for needed funds, especially as interest rates rise and climate risks are priced into borrowing costs.³³

Devolved fiscal responsibility unequally harms Black majority cities like Jackson, Mississippi, which are forced to pay more than white counterparts and are targeted for predatory financial deals.³⁴ Responsibility for resilience investments should be moved to more central entities with greater ability to bear costs and risks.³⁵ Importantly, this funding backstop does not mean that all planning should be held at the federal level. Instead, resilience priorities can be devolved for community identification and control where appropriate, while funding is aggregated at higher levels where it can be accumulated most effectively, then distributed to meet community needs. The Green New Deal for Communities offers an example of federally funded climate investments with governance devolved specifically to the municipal level, particularly to navigate around reactionary/hostile state legislatures to Black or progressive municipalities.

100-year floods are now expected to happen annually on the US East Coast.³⁶ In the US West, wildfire season is growing longer and stronger, and risks of extreme weather like flash flooding are exacerbated by global temperatures rising. As communities in Florida, Puerto Rico, and beyond already know, the realities of the climate crisis have forced a constant state of disaster response and recovery. Today, people can work together to support each other, remove vulnerabilities, and build supportive communities where people can safely live, work, and play even as the frontlines of the climate crisis expand.

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