



FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE AND THE DISASTER RELIEF FUND

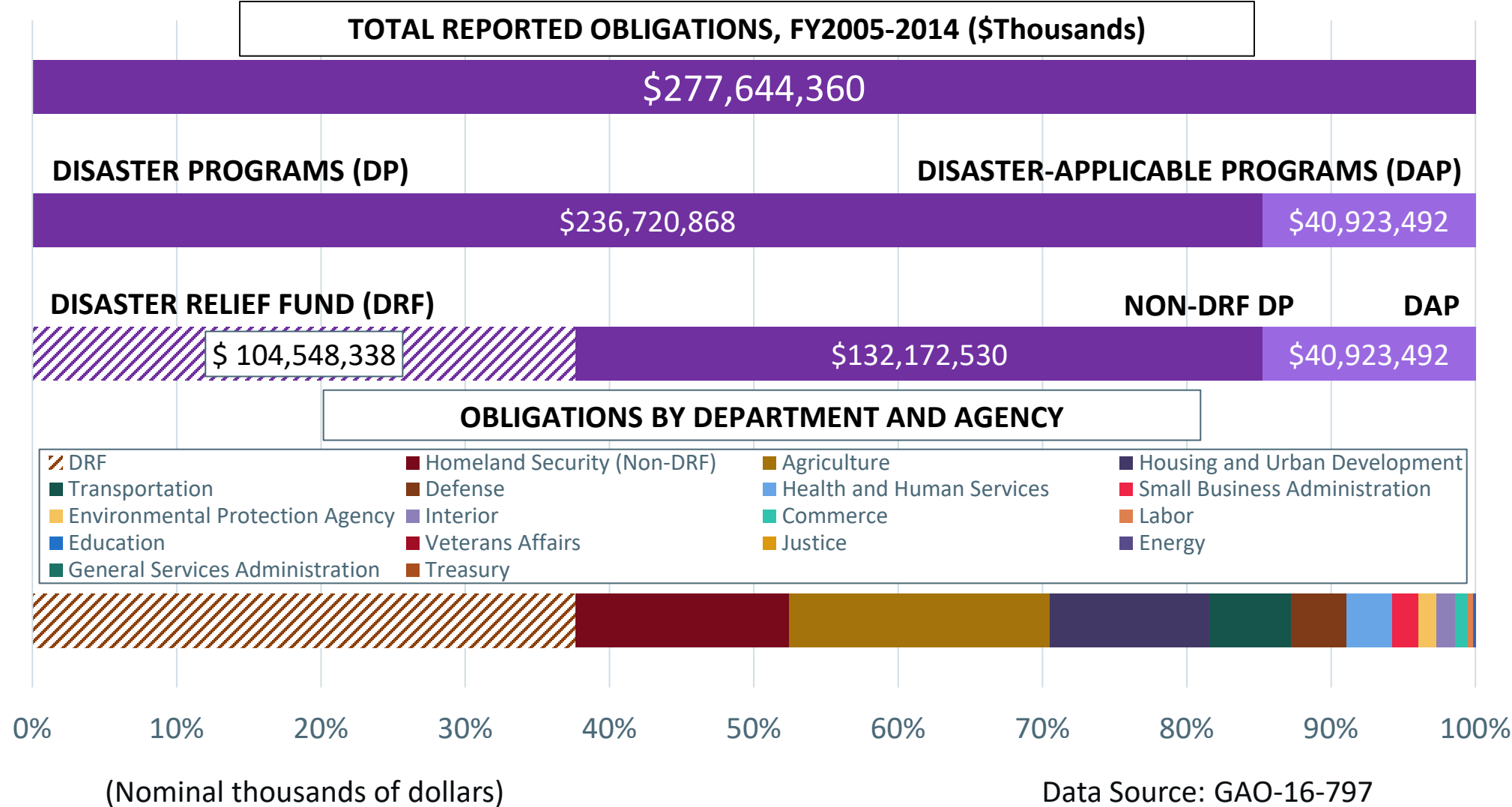
William L. Painter, Specialist in Homeland Security Policy and Appropriations

Government and Finance Division

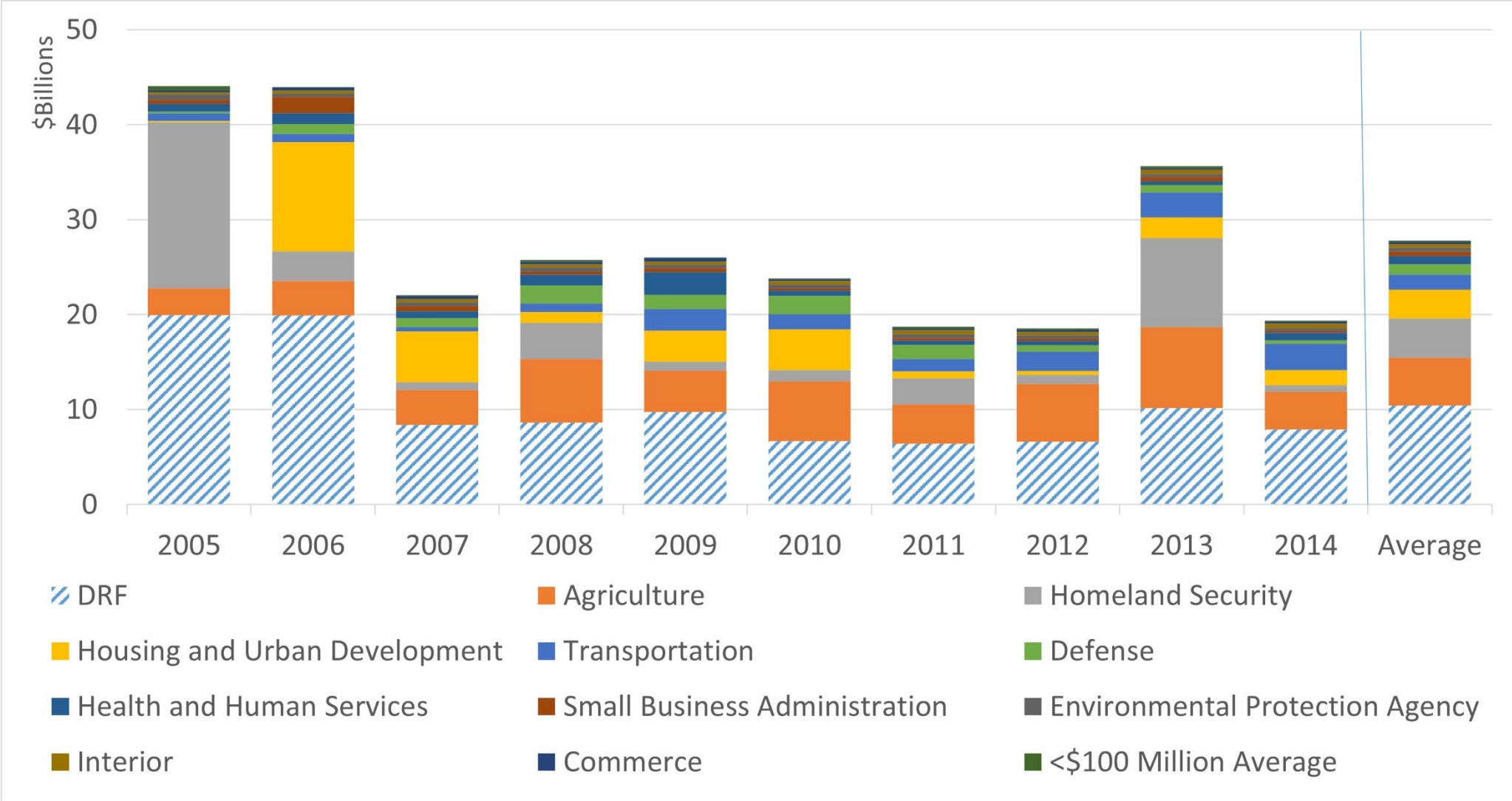
Federalism and Emergency Management Section

September 16, 2025

Reported Disaster Assistance Obligations, FY2005-14



Obligations for Disaster Relief, by Fiscal Year, FY2005-14



(Nominal dollars)

Data Source: GAO-16-797

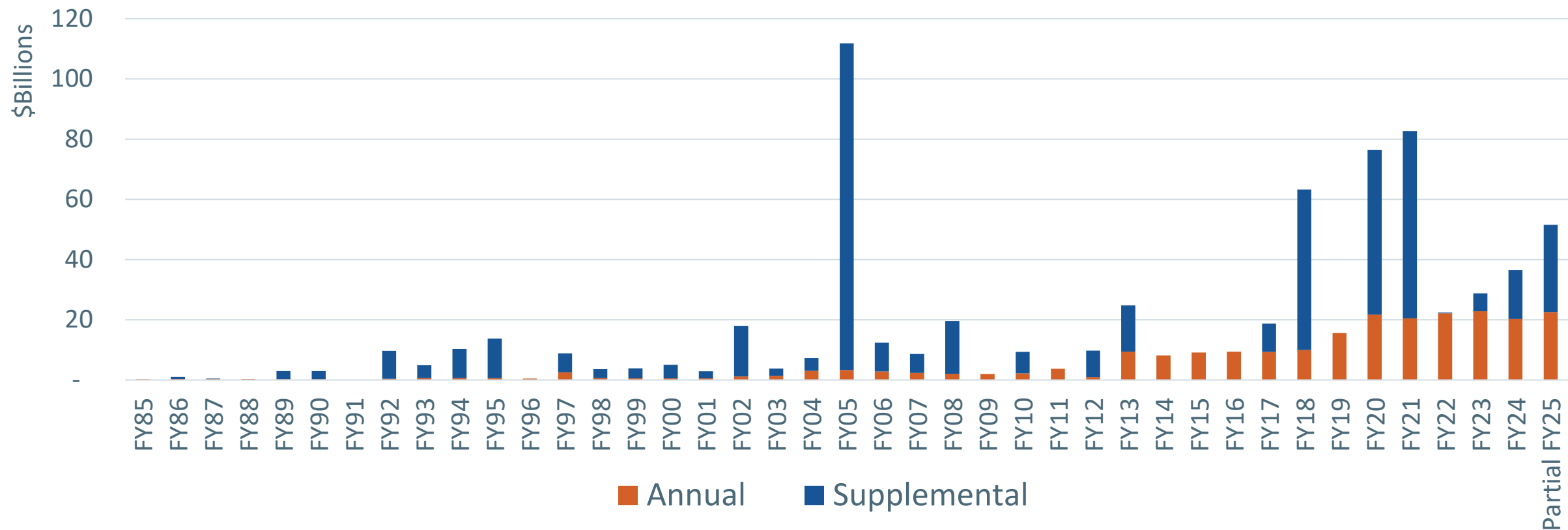
The DRF Appropriation: FY2024

DISASTER RELIEF FUND

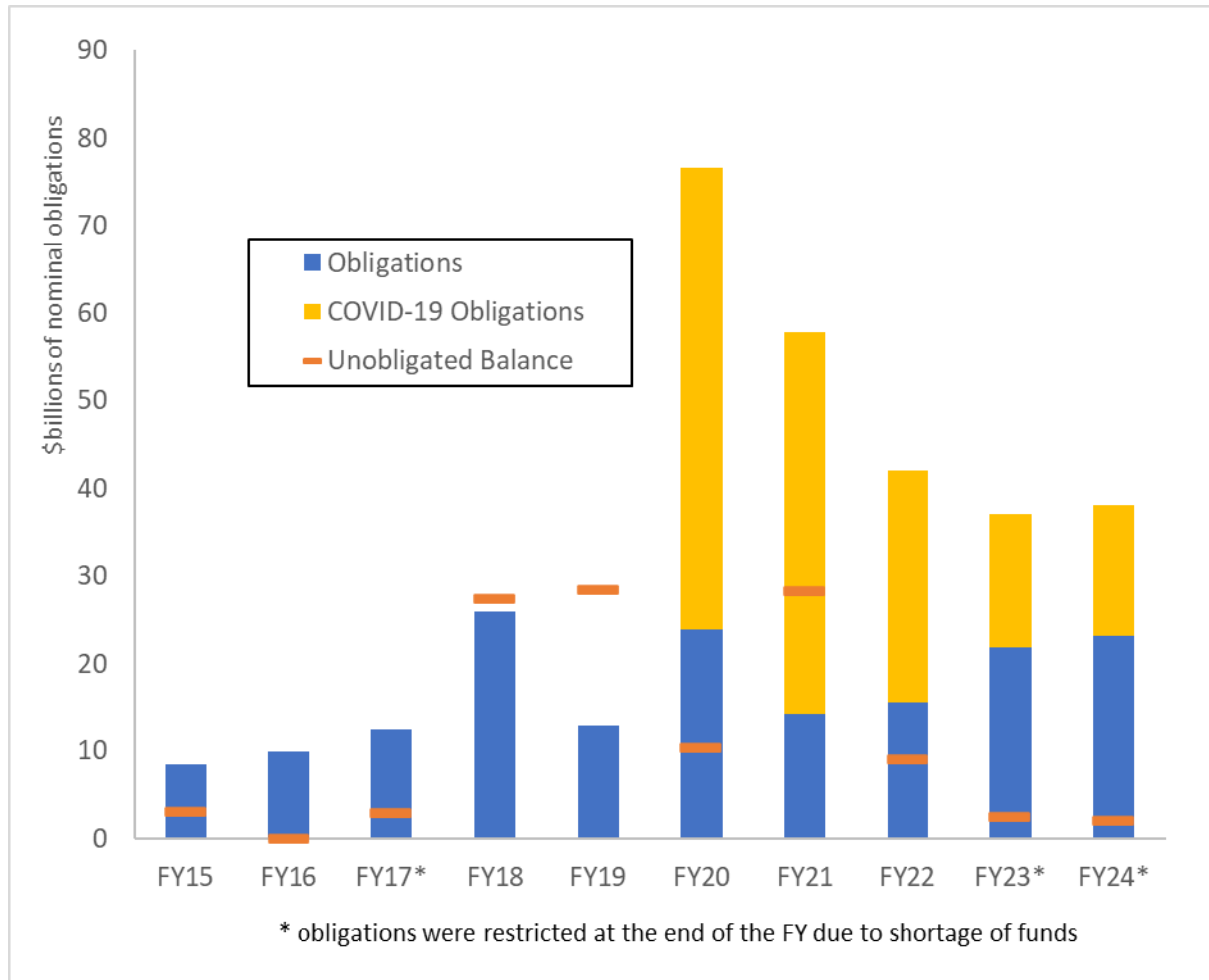
For necessary expenses in carrying out the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.), \$20,261,000,000, to remain available until expended: *Provided*, That such amount shall be for major disasters declared pursuant to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.) and is designated by the Congress as being for disaster relief pursuant to section 251(b)(2)(D) of the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985.

— P.L. 118–47; 138 STAT. 609

ANNUAL AND SUPPLEMENTAL DISASTER RELIEF FUND APPROPRIATIONS, FY1985-FY2025



DRF Obligations, COVID-19 and Non-COVID-19, FY2015-24



Source: CRS Report R47676, *Disaster Relief Fund State of Play: In Brief*, William L. Painter, updated April 9, 2025.

- ✓ Values based on year-end obligation totals – therefore deobligations of prior-year funds are not reflected in annual totals, which will be higher than up-to-date FEMA data.
- ✓ Orange bar reflects end-of-year unobligated balances available for paying costs associated with major disasters.
- ✓ Implementation of “Immediate Needs Funding” obligation restrictions in FY2017, FY2023, and FY2024, shifted some obligations for recovery and mitigation projects into the next fiscal year.



FEMA PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Erica Lee—Specialist in Emergency Management and Disaster Recovery

Government and Finance Division

Federalism and Emergency Management Section

September 16, 2025

WHAT IS FEMA PUBLIC ASSISTANCE?

WHAT IS PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (PA)?



- State governments
- Local governments
- Territorial governments
- Tribal governments
- Eligible nonprofits



Debris Removal



Emergency Protective Measures
(emergency personnel, materials,
operations)



Reconstruction of
disaster-damaged public and
eligible nonprofit facilities



FEMA Photo Library, "FEMA Virginia Task Force 2 provides assessment, rescue and recovery while working alongside local authorities," October 2, 2022.

FEMA Photo Library, "Fire Prevention Week begins at FEMA Headquarters," October 7, 2008 (Washington, DC, Mt. Weather Fire/Rescue HAZMAT 21 truck on display at FEMA Headquarters).

FEMA Photo Library, "Greensburg High School tornado damage in Kansas," May 16, 2007 (Greensburg, KS following an F5 tornado May 4, 2007).

Public Law 100-707
100th Congress

An Act

To amend the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 to provide for more effective assistance in response to major disasters and emergencies, and for other purposes.

Nov. 23, 1988
[H.R. 2707]

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

TITLE I—DISASTER RELIEF AND EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE AMENDMENTS

SEC. 101. SHORT TITLE; AMENDMENTS TO DISASTER RELIEF ACT OF 1974.

(a) **SHORT TITLE.**—This title may be cited as “The Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Amendments of 1988.”

(b) **AMENDMENTS TO DISASTER RELIEF ACT OF 1974.**—Except as otherwise expressly provided, whenever in this title an amendment or repeal is expressed in terms of an amendment to, or repeal of, a section or other provision, the reference shall be considered to be made to a section or other provision of the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 (42 U.S.C. 5121–5202).

SEC. 102. AMENDMENT TO SHORT TITLE.

(a) **AMENDMENT TO SHORT TITLE.**—The first section is amended by striking out “Disaster Relief Act of 1974” and inserting in lieu thereof “The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.”

(b) **REFERENCES.**—Whenever any reference is made in any law (other than this Act), regulation, document, rule, record, or other paper of the United States to a section or provision of the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, such reference shall be deemed to be a reference to such section or provision of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

SEC. 103. AMENDMENTS TO TITLE I.

(a) **FINDINGS AND DECLARATIONS.**—Section 101(b) (42 U.S.C. 5121(b)) is amended—

- (1) by striking out paragraph (7);
- (2) by striking out “; and” at the end of paragraph (6); and
- (3) by inserting “and” at the end of paragraph (5).

(b) **DEFINITION OF EMERGENCY.**—Section 102(1) is amended to read as follows:

“(1) **EMERGENCY.**—‘Emergency’ means any occasion or instance for which, in the determination of the President, Federal assistance is needed to supplement State and local efforts and capabilities to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, or to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in any part of the United States.”

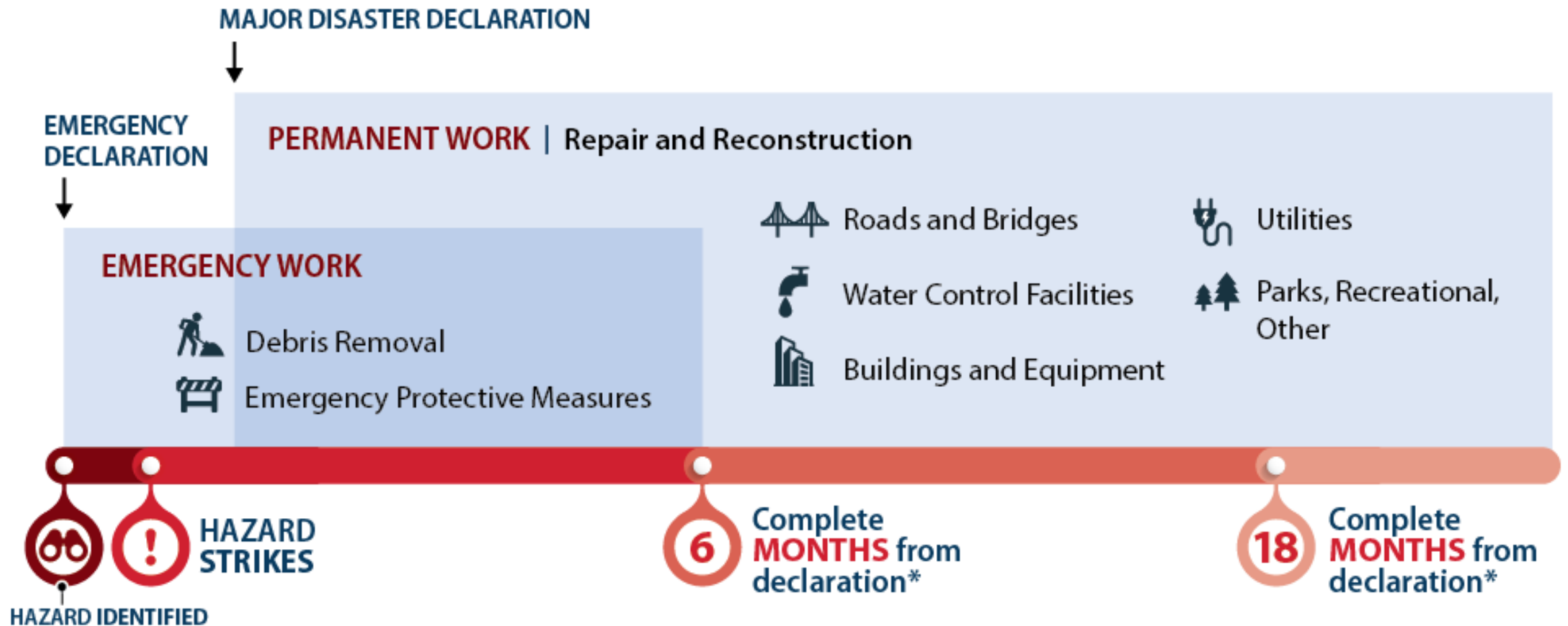
(c) **DEFINITION OF MAJOR DISASTER.**—Section 102(2) is amended to read as follows:

Safety.
State and local
governments.
The Disaster
Relief and
Emergency
Assistance
Amendments of
1988.
42 USC 5121
note.

The Robert T.
Stafford Disaster
Relief and
Emergency
Assistance Act.
42 USC 5121
note.
42 USC 5121
note.

42 USC 5122.

How is FEMA Public Assistance Authorized?



Source: Developed by CRS based on 44 C.F.R. §§206.40 and 206.204(c) and (d); and FEMA, "How a Disaster Gets Declared," <https://www.fema.gov/disasters/how-declared>.

Notes: * These timelines reflect 44 C.F.R. §206.204(c), though extensions may be granted upon request per 44 C.F.R. §206.204(c) and (d).

HOW MUCH DOES THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PAY?

- The Stafford Act prescribes a **minimum 75% federal cost share** for all forms of Public Assistance.*
- Public Assistance is the only Stafford Act grant program without a fixed or maximum federal cost share set in statute, allowing the President to increase the federal share.

HOW IS PA FUNDED?

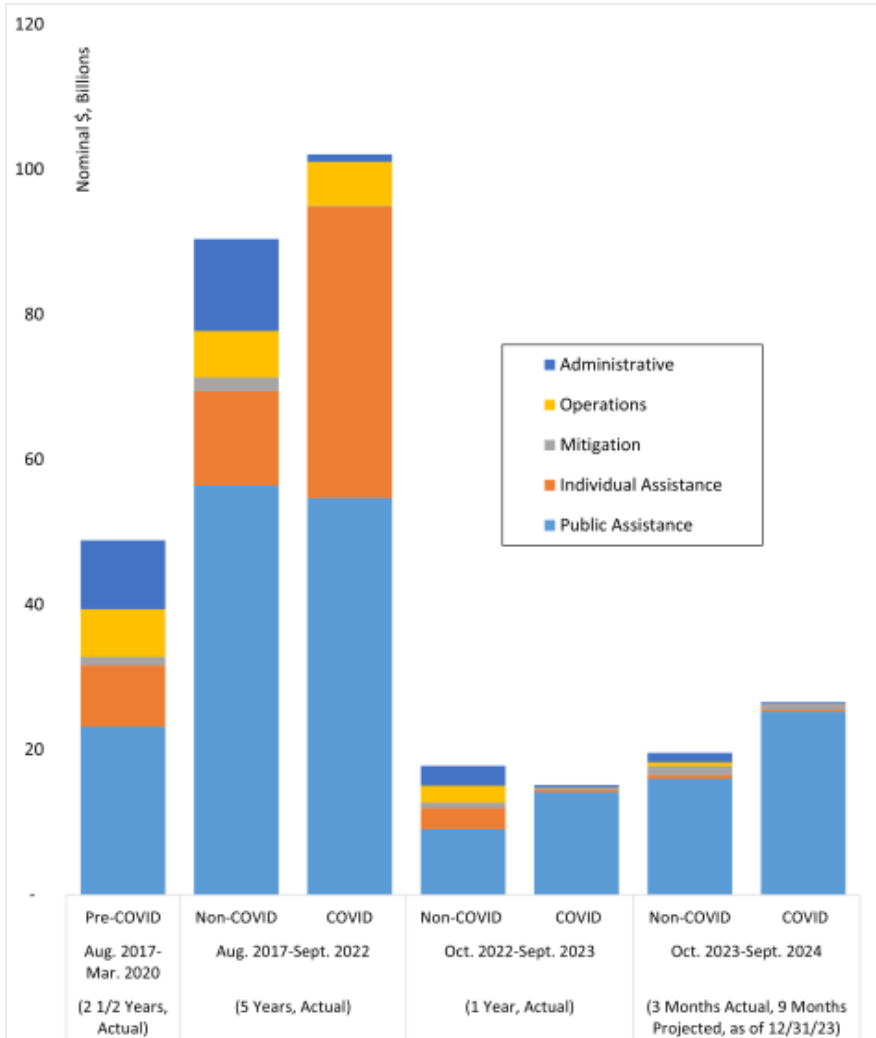


Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) Appropriations

The source of funding for Stafford Act Assistance.



PA accounts for more than **1/2** of DRF obligations year over year,** 2001-2020.



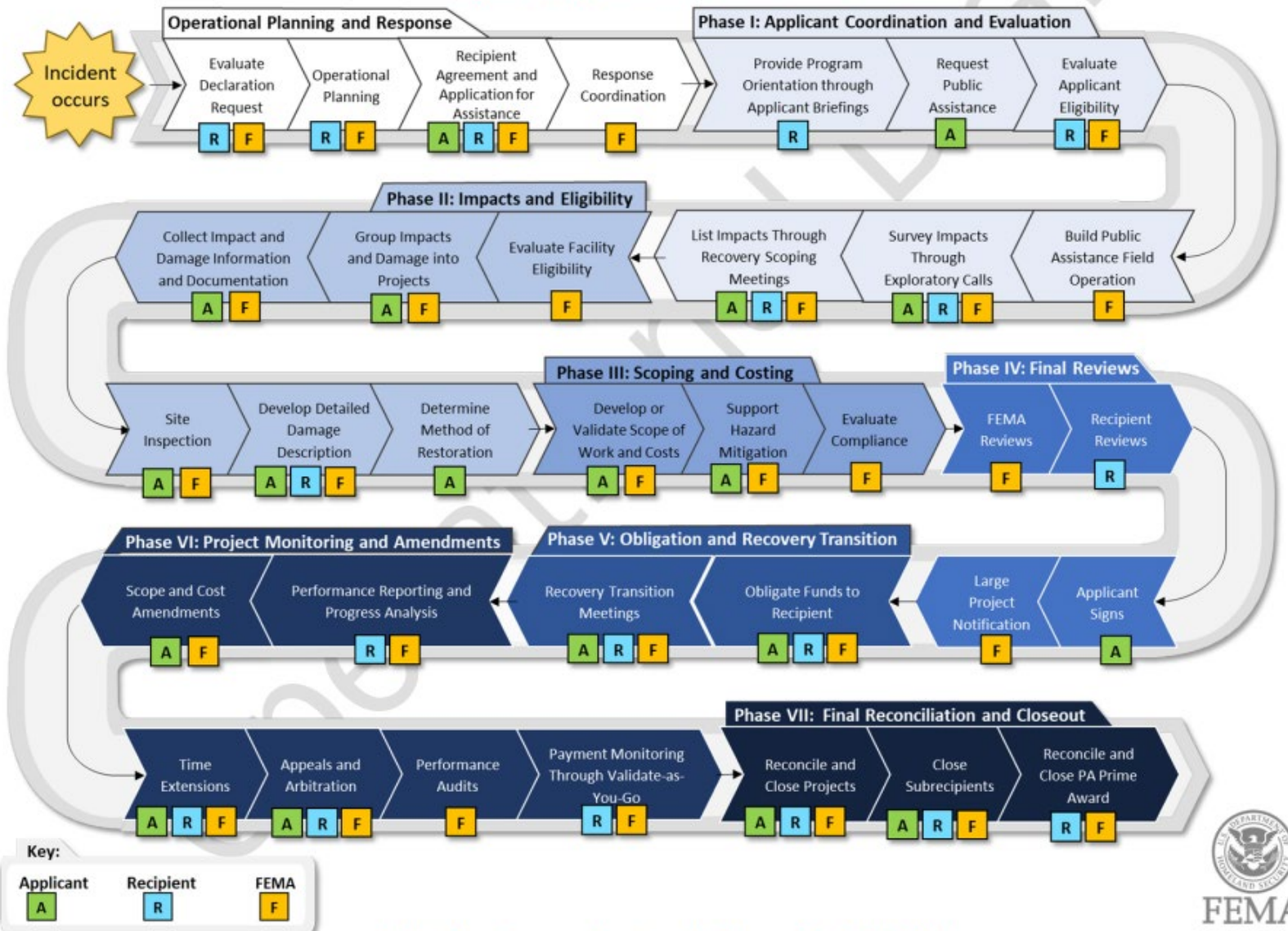
- Since 2020, the share of the DRF obligations for Public Assistance has grown.
- PA is the most common form of assistance delivered in Stafford Act declarations – many of which are “PA-only” declarations.

Source: CRS Report R47676, *Disaster Relief Fund: Overview and Issues*, William L. Painter, based on CRS analysis of FEMA Disaster Relief Fund monthly report data.

Notes ** Year over year indicates annual obligations. This calculation does not include Lost Wages Assistance for the COVID-19 pandemic.

FEMA Public Assistance National Workflow

PROGRAM DELIVERY PROCESS STEPS August 2022, Operational Draft Not for Distribution



Public Assistance Program Delivery Guide (Draft)



How does funding flow to disaster-stricken communities?

March 18, 2025

BUDGET, AUDIT, AND BOARD OF REVIEW COMMITTEE, JOSEPH I. GIARRUSSO

City Council Budget Committee to discuss nearly \$2 billion in unfinished street repairs, plan to finish select projects

NEW ORLEANS - The New Orleans City Council Budget Committee will hear presentations on Thursday, March 20 on the unfinished road projects and how the City plans to finish them.

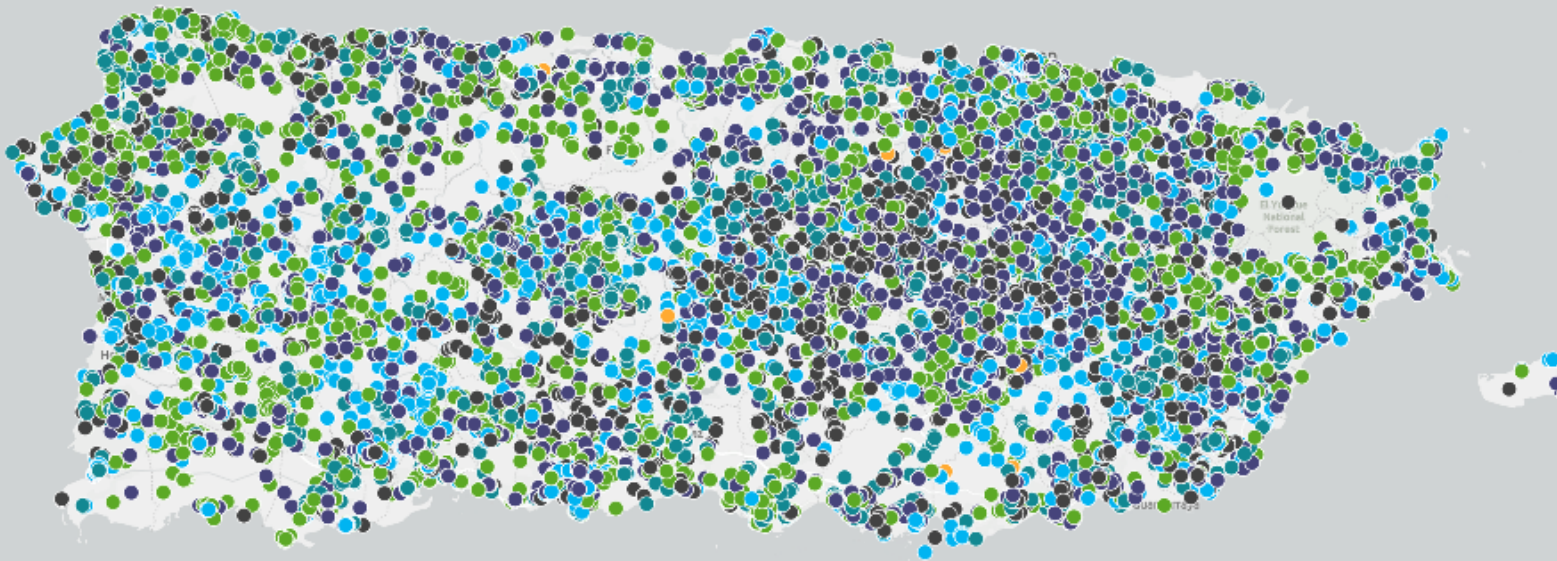


Figure 6: Illustration of the Amount of Paperwork Submitted to FEMA to Close a Major Disaster Declaration following a Landslide in Washington, 2013



Source: State of Washington and The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. | GAO-18-443

Key Issues: Length, Number, Complexity of Public Assistance Grants

Top Left, moving counterclockwise: New Orleans City Council, "City Council Budget Committee to discuss nearly \$2 billion in unfinished street repairs, plan to finish select projects," March 18, 2025, [https://council.nola.gov/news/march-2025/city-council-budget-committee-to-discuss-nearly-\\$2/](https://council.nola.gov/news/march-2025/city-council-budget-committee-to-discuss-nearly-$2/).

Bottom Left, COR3, "Reconstruction Execution Status: Permanent Work Projects After Hurricane Maria and Earthquakes," webpage, Sept. 10, 2025, <https://recovery.pr.gov/en/road-to-recovery/pa-qpr/map>.

Right, GAO, *Emergency Management: Implementation of the Major Disaster Declaration Process for Federally Recognized Tribes*, GAO-18-443, May 2018, p. 17.



QUESTIONS

HOW DO APPLICANTS RECEIVE PA FUNDS?

Applicants are reimbursed for ^{at least} **75%** of the costs of approved work.

- ✓ Applicant submits Project Worksheets (PW) to FEMA and Primary Recipient.
- \$ FEMA approves PW. FEMA obligates funds from Disaster Relief Fund to Primary Recipient.
- ☰ Applicant requests reimbursement and submits supporting documentation to Primary Recipient.
- ✓ Primary Recipient reviews request for compliance and accuracy and approves request.
- \$ Primary Recipient disburses funds to Applicant to reimburse approved costs.



Applicant executes and pays for approved work (may be concurrent).

FEMA PA Funding Structure