

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 16, 2026

The Honorable Kristi Noem
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20032

Dear Secretary Noem,

We write to express our deep concerns about additional proposed staffing cuts at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA has long struggled to recruit and train enough skilled workers, a problem that the current Administration's policies and decisions has exacerbated. A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit found that FEMA lost 2,446 employees in the first half of 2025 alone, primarily to voluntary workforce reduction programs such as the deferred resignation program pushed by this Administration and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), representing almost 10 percent of the agency's overall workforce. In addition, reporting indicates that DHS late last year decided not to renew contracts for between 50 to 65 On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (commonly referred to as CORE) and are apparently considering eliminating an additional 1,000 CORE positions by the end of the month. Reducing CORE employees at a time when FEMA's workforce is already severely understaffed due to the Administration's efforts to dismantle FEMA will only make our nation less prepared to help communities before, during, and after disasters. Additionally, the personnel decisions your office has taken most certainly reduce FEMA's ability to perform its mission, raising concerns about potential violations of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA).

FEMA CORE employees make up approximately 40% of FEMA's workforce and are deployed, as needed, to disaster areas to assist with response and recovery. While CORE employees are temporary hires, usually retained for between two to four years periods, their contracts are often renewed, depending on available funding and the operational needs of the agency. This new directive requiring the DHS Secretary to personally approve these renewals is a concerning departure from past precedent. CORE employees give FEMA the flexibility to deploy personnel when disaster strikes and not renewing these essential personnel will only further weaken FEMA's ability to respond to disasters, putting communities across the country at risk if disaster strikes.

FEMA's personnel work tirelessly to support communities before, during and after disasters and are, by far, FEMA's most critical resource. However, in 2023, GAO found that

FEMA had missed its yearly staffing targets going all the way back to 2019, and that the gap between planned versus actual staffing levels grew to an almost 35 percent deficit across various positions.¹ Any gap, let alone a 35 percent shortfall in workforce target numbers, means that FEMA lacks the staff needed to properly respond to disasters. On top of this gap, the additional reductions reported by GAO in 2025 led the oversight watchdog to conclude “that a reduced number of staff across the same or a higher number of disasters nationwide could reduce the effectiveness of federal disaster response for upcoming disasters.”²

Particularly troubling is that FEMA under this Administration has seemingly not completed a staffing plan or workforce analysis prior to or since its loss of thousands of employees, bringing into question whether the agency can continue to fulfill its statutory mission under any proposed or anticipated staffing reductions. Without such an analysis, there is no basis to conclude that planned cuts would not impair FEMA’s disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation capabilities, especially given FEMA’s already documented staffing shortfalls and increasing disaster demands.

Finally, these workforce reductions taken by the Administration and your office appear to violate Congress’s intent to prevent the Secretary of DHS from interfering with FEMA as part of PKEMRA. Specifically, 6 U.S.C. § 316 states that the DHS Secretary may not substantially or significantly reduce FEMA’s authorities, responsibilities, or functions, or the capability of the agency to perform those missions, authorities, responsibilities.³ Congress imposed this requirement because of DHS’s interference in FEMA’s response to Hurricane Katrina, which led to catastrophic consequences.⁴ By unilaterally reducing the number of FEMA personnel, you are clearly hindering FEMA’s ability to perform its mission, in clear violation of statute.

Therefore, we request that you immediately halt any planned large-scale workforce cuts, including the non-renewal of CORE employees and permit FEMA the ability to determine which CORE employees are necessary for continued operations at FEMA, as intended by PKEMRA. Additionally, we ask that FEMA complete and share with Congress a staffing plan before any future cuts take place.

Sincerely,

¹ Government Accountability Agency, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps* (May 2, 2023) (GAO-23-105663).

² Government Accountability Agency, *Disaster Assistance High-Risk Series: Federal Response Workforce Readiness* (Sept 2, 2025) (GAO-25-108598).

³ 6 USC § 316(c)(2).

⁴ Report: *Katrina response a ‘failure of leadership’*, CNN (Feb. 14, 2006) (www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/02/13/katrina.congress/index.html).



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