



Storm Recovery: Local Efforts, Municipal Constraints, and New Ways Forward

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Climate change-induced storm surges and rising sea levels will steadily cause more damage to homes in low-lying urban and metropolitan regions, in turn creating profound new challenges for local governments. In this paper, Michael McCabe reflects on the lessons to be learned from a housing recovery program aimed at assisting homeowners in one- to four-family residential buildings in New York City.

Rising waters and more frequent and ferocious storms propelled by climate change make it imperative for urbanists to assess local approaches to storm recovery in the United States. This may seem counterintuitive, given that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plays the key initial role in responding to damage from federally declared disasters, generally followed up with longer-term assistance through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). However, just as many other federal policies have been devolved to state and local administration, the federal government places the primary responsibility for managing storm recovery on municipal governments, even though resource constraints make it hard for municipal governments to respond effectively. This essay uses New York City's Build it Back (BIB) program—a local program developed to help homeowners recover from Hurricane Sandy—to illuminate how these constraints shape program outcomes and what localities might do to improve them.¹

Hurricane Sandy in New York City

Hurricane Sandy landed squarely on New York City on October 29, 2012. FEMA, as well as city and state agencies, provided emergency relief to the storm victims. Six months later, HUD awarded a Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Relief (CDBG-DR) to New York City to support longer-term relief efforts. The HUD grant allocated a total of \$4.2 billion, with \$1.7 billion directed to helping owners of one- to four-unit residential buildings. New York's city council provided supplemental funding and the Bloomberg administration created a new Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations (HRO) to carry out this homeowner-relief program.

This federally and locally funded local program was designed to provide homeowners with the last measure of financing they needed after exhausting all other primary relief mechanisms, including private and public insurance, home equity and other similar loans, and philanthropic support. In total, the program heard from a total of 18,266 registrants,² many of whom had significant damage to their homes.

¹ The opinions expressed here are solely my own and do not represent those of the Center for Urban Research of the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center or the New York City Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations (HRO).

² The official number of people initially contacting the program was 23,720. However, a review of administrative data established the actual number of people initially registered with the program to be 18,266. This discrepancy reflects duplicate contacts and the fact that some who expressed interest, such as renters, were not eligible for program services.

The program aroused a good deal of controversy from its inception. Many politicians, including Mayor Bill de Blasio, who inherited the program after January 2014, worried that the city government was not well suited to managing a massive housing reconstruction program. Many homeowners were also uneasy about the city's ability to manage this undertaking, and their concerns mounted during the difficult early period of program implementation. The inherent difficulty of carrying out such a program is arguably substantiated by the significant number of registrants still awaiting a completion of services at the recent five-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy.

The following discussion highlights key lessons we might learn from this experience based on my participation in the research team assessing registrant progress through the BIB program that HRO commissioned the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center to carry out. While these recommendations focus on New York City, they are relevant to the many other localities that have been or will be dealing with storm recovery. They highlight steps the federal government should take to support local governments because many of the difficulties in local program development and implementation can be traced to the federal government's decision to opt out of managing storm recovery and to pass that responsibility to local governments that are new to this challenge. But local governments can learn important lessons as well.

1. Leaving significant discretion in program development and implementation to localities that have not built up the administrative capacity to carry them out can lead to program inefficiencies and frustrated clients

The federal government has expected cities to develop storm-recovery programs with little guidance or help. Cities have been left to establish administrative capacity, develop and disseminate program rules and guidelines, and figure out how best to deliver help. Proponents of localism might favor this approach because local political actors know more about the needs of their locality than do Washington bureaucrats. We cannot overlook the fact, however, that the complexity of storm recovery imposes a steep learning curve and challenges the effectiveness of newly developed programs throughout every step of the planning and implementation process.

One such problem is that federal, state, and local programs frequently change their rules over time. They make these changes to address lessons learned, and to respond to registrants' needs or desires that they did not initially anticipate in the program-development process. The frequency of these changes in turn frustrates registrants. For example, some registrants feel that program guidelines have become less clear. Early registrants who did not benefit from later changes often feel neglected. More fundamentally, the need for frequent regulatory changes highlights how the federal government, which has much longer experience and greater administrative capacity in storm recovery, has done too little to help localities develop and roll out storm-recovery programs.

To remedy this situation, FEMA could draw on previous local experiences to devise model programs and procedures. It should then support training and peer-to-peer learning across localities, because more of them are sure to face more of these events in the future. If FEMA does not want to do this itself, the federal government should fund regional collaborations among local-government recovery organizations. Absent this kind of federal support or coordination, New York and New Orleans, for example, could establish an informal sharing arrangement that allows them to develop storm-recovery best practices, but this would be the least desirable response, given local resource limitations.

2. Localities need to ensure that the initial set of customer-service representatives are professional and well versed in the multiple dynamics of the program; it is extremely challenging for them to accomplish this because the programs are complex, the needs immediate, and budgets constrained

Build it Back, like any storm-recovery program, not only had to carry out basic administrative tasks like registrant document collection, but also had to guide program clients through the entire recovery process. This required BIB to secure the services of customer representatives with intimate knowledge of program specifics ranging from storm-damage assessments, the ability to identify and present the various potential pathways according to each registrant's particular situation, an understanding of the regulatory requirements for each of these available pathways, and some knowledge of the reconstruction process itself. They also need to know what problems are likely to arise when local practices do not square with federal program requirements, such as when homeowners in vulnerable areas did not originally build their dwellings to satisfy the local building codes, given that city programs clearly cannot condone replacing prior conditions. Finding all these skills in a newly assembled staff is a tall order.

Build it Back struggled to procure sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable customer-service contractors. Some contractors lacked professionalism and were quickly replaced, and this happened more than once. Even if BIB had not had this problem, its service representatives still faced a long and steep learning curve.

Clearly, local and federal government need to pay greater attention to knowledge dissemination and training. Given that the triggering events are likely to be episodic, it is generally not rational for localities to create a permanent experienced staff that specializes solely in disaster recovery. As a consequence, localities will remain unprepared for future storm-relief efforts and FEMA should take the lead in helping them.

The first option would be for FEMA to take responsibility for customer-service training and capacity building. As a national organization, FEMA operates on a scale that local governments cannot. It has sufficient resources to create a permanent, knowledgeable storm-recovery staff that could entirely manage or at least supplement local storm-recovery operators.

If the federal government is unwilling to take on this burden, then individual cities, acting alone or together, must find a way to do something similar. New York City might find additional ongoing environmental resiliency-planning and customer-service tasks that would justify maintaining at least a core of its existing storm-recovery staff. They would be in a position to roll out and administer an already developed recovery program in the event of another major storm. This unit could also generate revenues by conducting training activities for other localities or even making its employees available as paid consultants to other cities.

A second option that does not require localities to create permanent staffs would be to create training programs that could educate a reserve pool of potential customer-service representatives. This might be done in conjunction with public community colleges in areas that are likely to be affected. The training programs could vet or certify potential future customer-service representatives. Private or nonprofit organizations would then employ them and city governments would then contract for their services when needed.

A third option would be for cities and municipalities in environmentally vulnerable regions to form their own training and capacity-development organization. For example, municipalities up and down the Eastern Seaboard might identify knowledgeable and experienced storm-recovery personnel and jointly fund them as a reserve for deployment wherever needed.

3. Cities must decide how to relocate people away from the most vulnerable areas

New York City's Build it Back program, like many other storm-recovery programs, prioritizes home recovery and rebuilding over homeowner relocation. In instances where homes are only partially damaged and/or can be elevated or altered in other ways to greatly improve their resiliency, this prioritization may make sense—indeed, city planners should always prioritize neighborhood and community preservation. However, the certainty of sea-level rise and more powerful future storms forces us to interrogate the logic of rebuilding. Build it Back repaired or replaced many homes in the Rockaways, a low-lying barrier island in Queens certain to face future damage. Even if individual homes in such areas can be made more resilient to future storms, inundation by another big storm would once again deprive their residents of access to transportation and basic life necessities.

To date, the rising cost of flood insurance required for home financing is the only deterrent to residents remaining in imperiled places. Federal, state, and local governments need to figure out new mechanisms for encouraging them to move.

4. So far, we are dumping the political costs on local authorities

It is hardly surprising that homeowners who have to wait years for help in mitigating the damage to their homes get angry. In New York City, their anger led some city-council members to attack the mayor and Build it Back program administrators. Yet the vast majority of issues that triggered this response are not local government's fault. Instead, they reflect the federal government's failure to consider and develop ways to help local governments overcome the multitude of factors that constrain and hamper their efforts to develop effective local storm-recovery programs from scratch. New York City and others damaged by major storms have learned important lessons from this experience. One is to bring city-council members in hard-hit areas into the storm-recovery planning/implementation process from the beginning, so they can see these problems for themselves. And indeed, city-council members can provide additional channels of communication between homeowners and storm-recovery administrators.

5. The experience to date is eroding trust in government

If we do not resolve the problems that plague storm-recovery programs, homeowners and others who suffer storm damages may lose their trust in government. People interact with government in profoundly intimate ways through programs like Build it Back. If people no longer trust government, such programs will work even less well, at great cost not only to government but also to the homeowners, further aggravating the anti-government ethos that has become pervasive in American political culture.

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