



OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RELOCATION

**A REPORT BY THE COMMUNITY-
DRIVEN RELOCATION
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
NATIONAL CLIMATE TASK
FORCE**

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Introduction

Across the Nation, communities are being impacted by disasters—from coastal erosion and wildfires to chemical spills and pollution—and facing challenging decisions about whether and how to move out of harm’s way. Moving from a place with historical or cultural ties can be traumatic and disruptive. When a community considers relocation, it is important for the Federal government to be prepared to support and partner with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments, through available programs and initiatives.

Community-driven relocation describes a situation where a community decides it will relocate, in whole or in part, to reduce the risk faced by communities and individuals. The phrase “community-driven relocation” is deliberate—the intent is to collectively reinforce that it is essential for the consideration or implementation of planned relocation projects to be grounded in a community’s ability to define and determine its future. Community-driven relocation should be considered a viable strategy for communities facing the impacts of a changing climate or hazards from toxic contamination.

As part of its historic commitment to climate action and environmental justice, the Biden-Harris Administration has been taking proactive steps to prioritize climate adaptation and resilience, disaster recovery and response, and reducing exposure to toxic contamination. In supporting communities affected by climate change, the Administration recognizes the need for action to protect Tribal Nations and local communities that are most in harm’s way. That is why the Biden-Harris Administration, as part of the National Climate Task Force, established a Community-Driven Relocation Subcommittee (CDR Subcommittee) to the Coastal Resilience Interagency Working Group to identify and build whole-of-government strategies for supporting communities that are considering relocating away from high-risk places.¹

This Community-Driven Relocation Subcommittee report, *Opportunities for Federal Support of Community-Driven Relocation*, provides background on community-driven relocation, an overview of the current federal legal and programmatic landscape, and potential next steps that Federal agencies can take, as part of a whole-of-government approach, to support communities contemplating relocation. This report is the first time that the Federal government has considered the concepts of climate- and pollution-driven relocation together in this manner. The Administration recognizes that not only are the risks and impacts of climate change and legacy contamination disproportionately concentrated in Tribal Nations and other communities with environmental justice concerns, but that these communities often face a steeper road to recovery when disaster strikes.

In releasing this report, the Biden-Harris Administration is providing a vision of a more comprehensive system for the Federal government to support voluntary community-driven relocation in partnership with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments and non-federal partners.

¹ [FEMA Efforts Advancing Community-Driven Relocation | Federal Environmental Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](https://www.fema.gov)



Federal Strategy on Community-Driven Relocation

Communities across the Nation are facing the impacts of a changing climate, including more frequent and severe climate-related disasters than ever before.² People’s lives and communities are changing as they face the outcomes of extreme weather events such as flooding, wildfires, drought, extreme heat, sea-level rise, and permafrost thaw. In addition to these climate-related hazards, many affected communities face environmental justice concerns,³ including challenges with pollution, oil and chemical spills, and other types of toxic contamination.⁴ These environmental hazards often lead to poorer health and lower life expectancies for individuals in these communities compared to those in other communities in our Nation.⁵ Furthermore, both climate-related hazards and pollution-related hazards can have severe impacts on individuals’ livelihoods, the community lifelines that provide essential services, and the economies and ecosystems that support them.

The Biden-Harris Administration has taken historic steps to ensure federal programs encompass both proactive climate adaptation as well as disaster recovery and response. Recognizing the need to support community-driven relocation and the climate resilience of Tribal communities facing the most severe impacts of climate change, Congress enacted the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. As part of its efforts to implement these laws, in August 2022, the Biden-Harris Administration launched an interagency Community-Driven Relocation Subcommittee under the Coastal Resilience Interagency Working Group of the National Climate Task Force to identify and build whole-of-government strategies to support communities that wish to relocate away from high-risk areas. Co-chaired by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), and the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), with additional leadership from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), the CDR Subcommittee is composed of offices within the Executive Office of the President and 14 federal agencies.⁶

² [Fifth National Climate Assessment | US Global Change Research Program \(globalchange.gov\)](https://www.globalchange.gov/)

³ “Communities with environmental justice concerns experience disproportionate and adverse human health or environmental burdens. These burdens arise from a number of causes, including inequitable access to clean water, clean air, natural places, and resources for other basic human health and environmental needs; the concentration of pollution, hazardous waste, and toxic exposures; and underinvestment in affordable housing that is safe and healthy and in basic infrastructure and services to support such housing, including safe drinking water and effective sewage management. The cumulative impacts of exposure to those types of burdens and other stressors, including those related to climate change and the environment, further disadvantage communities with environmental justice concerns.” [Executive Order 14096: Revitalizing our Nations Commitment to Environmental Justice for All](#)

⁴ [Contaminated Land | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](https://www.epa.gov/)

⁵ [Executive Order 14096: Revitalizing our Nations Commitment to Environmental Justice for All](#)

⁶ Executive Office of the President offices on the CDR Subcommittee include: Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), Office of Domestic Climate Policy (CPO), Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), Office of Management and Budget (OMB), National Security Council (NSC), and the Domestic Policy Council (DPC). Federal agency membership includes: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) / Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S.



The CDR Subcommittee strives to facilitate a whole-of-government approach to coordinate funds, services, and interagency relocation efforts with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial partners. The Subcommittee convenes federal agencies to explore key considerations, issues, and strategies for community partnerships to support voluntary movement away from high-risk areas. In late 2023, the CDR Subcommittee expanded its scope to include pollution-driven relocation in addition to climate-driven relocation, to encompass common needs and solutions across these communities.

To reduce the negative impacts of climate-driven disasters, including slow onset or chronic disasters like drought and sea-level rise, communities are adapting to climate impacts and becoming more resilient. Resilience can be built in a variety of ways: with structural or nature-based solutions; by strengthening social capital and cohesion through knowledge sharing, clear communication, and community safety nets;⁷ by constructing sustainable, redundant systems (e.g., energy, water, food systems); and by relocating homes and infrastructure that cannot be sufficiently protected.⁸

Community-driven relocation could also be a strategy for communities in severe instances of environmental injustice, such as those involving the cumulative impacts of pollution that has created dangerous health or safety conditions left unchecked by effective regulation and enforcement. Contamination- or pollution-driven relocation could be a strategy for supporting communities moving out of harm's way, but should not detract from remedies that allow communities to remain in place.

Within the context of this report, community-driven relocation focuses on communities facing more frequent and intense climate-driven threats—including, but not limited to, coastal erosion and storms, repeated flooding, wildfire, permafrost thaw, aridification, and drought—as well as communities facing severe pollution. Recognizing that relocation can be driven by both climate hazards and severe pollution impacts to local communities reduces the risk that the solutions to these challenges become siloed. The Biden-Harris Administration is exploring ways to expand federal capacity, within existing authorities, to support individuals, neighborhoods, or communities who decide to consider relocation due to pollution-related issues, climate-driven hazards, or both.

This report examines federal authorities and programs available to facilitate community-driven relocation, while recognizing that State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments and non-federal partners have distinct responsibilities and authorities applicable to communities considering relocation. It draws on a breadth of resources and expertise from across federal and non-federal spaces, including but not limited to, the National Climate Resilience Framework,⁹

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Economic Development Administration (EDA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Denali Commission.

⁷ Carmen, E., Fazey, I., Ross, H., Bedinger, M., Smith, F., Prager, K., McClymont, K., Morrisson, D., (2022). [Building community resilience in a context of climate change: The role of social capital](#). *Ambio* 51, 1371–1387.

⁸ The phrase “community-driven relocation” is deliberate—the intent is to collectively reinforce that it is essential for the consideration or implementation of planned relocation projects be grounded in a community’s ability to define and determine their future.

⁹ [National Climate Resilience Framework | The White House \(whitehouse.gov\)](#)



National Disaster Recovery Framework,¹⁰ the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community-Driven Relocation,¹¹ the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium’s The Unmet Needs of Environmentally Threatened Alaska Native Villages: Assessment and Recommendations,¹² the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine’s Community-Driven Relocation: Recommendations for the U.S. Gulf Coast Region and Beyond,¹³ and engagements with external stakeholders.¹⁴ The whole-of-government approach to environmental justice, advanced in Executive Order 14096: *Revitalizing our Nation’s Commitment to Environmental Justice for All* also guides federal agencies’ consideration of community-driven relocation.¹⁵

This report identifies potential policy and investment opportunities that can help inform priorities and the Federal budget development process, but it is not a budget document and does not imply approval of any specific action or investment. All goals and activities included in this report are subject to resource constraints and weighing of priorities as part of the annual budget formulation process, as well as the availability of appropriations provided by Congress.

As the Federal government advances an all-of-government strategy to support community-driven relocation, it will build on the following vision, goals, and guiding principles.

Vision

A unified federal strategy on community-driven relocation, where:

- Tribal Nations and impacted communities decide for themselves to relocate, or to explore it as an option;
- Tribal Nations and communities facing severe climate-related and/or pollution threats have the knowledge and federal agency support (e.g., funding, tools, resources and information, technical assistance, capacity building) to enable residents to thrive, before, during, and after relocation, and to enable relocation in a matter of years, not decades;
- Immediate needs for Tribal Nations and communities, as well as imminent threats, can be addressed alongside relocation planning and action;
- Federal programs that support community relocations are coordinated, allowing Tribal Nations and communities one point of entry to access federal funding and technical assistance;

¹⁰ [National Disaster Recovery Framework | Federal Environmental Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

¹¹ [Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community Driven Relocation | US Department of House and Urban Development \(HUD\) \(hud.gov\)](#)

¹² [The Unmet Needs of Environmentally Threatened Alaska Native Villages: Assessment and Recommendations | The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium](#)

¹³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, (2024). [Community-Driven Relocation: Recommendations for the U.S. Gulf Coast Region and Beyond](#). The National Academies Press.

¹⁴ In 2023, the CDR Subcommittee engaged with over 75 experts through two listening sessions and a FEMA-hosted workshop held during the Columbia University Managed Retreat Conference. These experts represented Federal, State, and local government, academia, private sector, and non-government organizations.

¹⁵ [Executive Order on Revitalizing our Nation’s Commitment to Environmental Justice for All |The White House \(whitehouse.gov\)](#)



- Communities receiving relocating residents have access to available federal resources to provide safe, affordable housing and other services that incoming residents will need; and
- New partnerships are developed with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help leverage and expand available funds, technical assistance, and best practices for community-driven relocation.

Goals

The Biden-Harris Administration’s National Climate Resilience Framework highlighted community-driven relocation as an important adaptation strategy and identified high-level opportunities for a more comprehensive system of federal support for community-driven relocation. The following goals include those opportunities for action from the National Climate Resilience Framework, in addition to goals identified by the CDR Subcommittee to explore, as appropriate:

- Facilitating access to funding and technical assistance for community-driven relocation.
- Supporting State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments developing resilience plans that consider impacts for both relocating and receiving communities.
- Developing strategies to expedite and improve the voluntary buyout processes.
- Monitoring and evaluating community-driven relocation programs to improve policies over time.
- Assessing relevant authorities, programs, and resources that can be used to support community-driven relocation.
- Providing meaningful engagement opportunities for Tribes and communities facing climate threats and other severe environmental justice concerns.

Guiding Principles

The Federal government will use the following principles to support community-driven relocation in strategic, operational, and planning contexts, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law:

1. **People-First, Community-Centric.** Position the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and society at the center of goals and solutions. Consider the needs and perspectives of all community members, prioritizing those that have been historically marginalized or disadvantaged.
2. **Proactive.** Implement solutions that anticipate and address climate threats and impacts before damages occur or continue. Prioritize activities and investments through hazard- or impact-based approaches, including approaches that account for complex risks, like cascading impacts and concurrent events, as well as approaches that account for differences in vulnerability and response capabilities within and across communities.
3. **Holistic.** Successful community-driven relocation demands a holistic approach that sustains the community’s physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being. Successful community-driven relocation solutions acknowledge the linkages between



individuals, families, social networks, and whole communities, and include both relocating and receiving communities.

4. **Equitable and Just.** Pursue solutions that address, and do not exacerbate, disparities between and within communities. Ensure that strategies respond to the needs of Tribal Nations and local communities that are facing a disproportionate share of climate- and pollution-related impacts and costs.
5. **Collaborative and Inclusive.** Create unified, coordinated mechanisms to establish common priorities, pool resources, establish working procedures, adopt a management structure, and engage diverse partners. Create pathways for all community members to be meaningfully involved in decision-making and conduct active outreach to raise awareness of these pathways and address barriers to participation. Provide technical assistance, tools, and resources to assist in facilitating meaningful and informed public participation.
6. **Timely and Flexible.** Conduct and deliver relocation services promptly to minimize continued impacts, while honoring community timelines for decision-making. Strategically sequence activities to promote coordination across all mission areas, avoid redundancies, and address potential conflicts, while remaining flexible to evolving needs.
7. **Durable.** Implement solutions that serve current and future needs. Ensure that there is continuity of technical expertise and leadership, including by enhancing or building community capacity to sustain and adapt solutions for the long term.
8. **Long-Term Approach.** Relocation should be part of a long-term comprehensive planning approach that considers and adapts to projected future climate conditions. Communities should determine if and when relocation makes sense from a safety, economic, and resilience perspective.
9. **Risk-Informed.** Understanding risk is an important component to making informed decisions and implementing appropriate solutions. Risk identification, analysis, and communication must be an integral part of the relocation process and is a prerequisite to the development of an actionable relocation plan. A comprehensive understanding of risk will integrate local and Indigenous Knowledge and scientific analysis.
10. **High-Quality Information Analysis.** Consider best-available science and information¹⁶— including Indigenous Knowledge—related to the potential relocation, including any disparate health effects (including risks) arising from climate impacts, exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards. Additionally, overall resilience to these impacts should also be considered.

To date, most federal programs supporting community-driven relocation have been reactive, addressing impacts to communities after disasters occur. This report represents an initial effort to review the system of federal support for community-driven relocation and identify opportunities for action. As the Federal government continues to formulate a more cohesive approach to community-driven relocation, agencies will continue to listen to the public, including communities considering or pursuing relocation and receiving communities, and will seek an approach that is flexible, robust, and sustainable, while addressing the needs of diverse communities and community partners.

¹⁶ [Environmental Justice Science, Data, and Research Plan |The White House \(whitehouse.gov\)](#)



Community-Driven Relocation Background

Community-driven relocation describes a situation where a community decides it will move, in whole or in part, out of harm's way. The term community-driven relocation is used throughout this report to describe relocation that is chosen and led by the community and not directed by local, State, or Federal authorities. Unlike other phrases such as managed retreat, climate migration, or resettlement, the phrase community-driven relocation intentionally emphasizes the importance of the impacted population being the driver of what is recognized as an incredibly complex and difficult process.

Use of the term “community” throughout this report is inclusive and flexible, referring to the people most affected by severe hazards who share an interest in relocation: from a household, neighborhood, whole town, or Tribal community. Regardless of the scale of community, the decision to relocate must be self-determined and the relocation process requested must be driven by the interests of community members. On Tribal lands, relocation decisions are determined by the Tribal government.

Community-driven relocation can occur proactively or reactively and can vary widely in scale, from moving select buildings or critical infrastructure with social and economic significance to moving entire neighborhoods or communities.¹⁷ To date, the Federal government has primarily supported relocations through mechanisms such as buyouts of individual properties. However, there have been a few cases of relocation of entire communities, involving a variety of different federal programs (see below).¹⁸

In November 2022, the Biden-Harris Administration announced the launch of a new Voluntary Community-Driven Relocation program, led by DOI's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), to assist Tribes severely impacted by climate-related environmental threats.¹⁹ These efforts signal the Federal government's commitment to more proactive efforts to support community-driven relocation. Through investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, DOI (\$115 million), FEMA (\$17.5 million), and the Denali Commission (\$2 million) committed a total of approximately \$135 million for 11 severely impacted Tribes to advance relocation efforts and adaptation planning:

- Newtok Village (Alaska), Native Village of Napakiak (Alaska), and Quinault Indian Nation (Washington) are receiving \$25 million each to relocate critical infrastructure; and
- The Native Village of Point Lay (Alaska), Huslia Village (Alaska), Native Village of Fort Yukon (Alaska), Native Village of Nelson Lagoon (Alaska), Havasupai Tribe (Arizona), Yurok Tribe (California), Chitimacha Tribe (Louisiana), and Passamaquoddy Indian

¹⁷ [Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community-Driven Relocation | US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning \(HUD\)](#)

¹⁸ Pinter, N., (2021). *True Stories of Managed Retreat from Rising Waters*. Issues in Science and Technology 352 (4).

¹⁹ [FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Support Indian Country and Native Communities Ahead of the Administration's Second Tribal Nations Summit | The White House \(whitehouse.gov\)](#)



Tribe (Maine) are receiving \$5 million each for planning support and preparation for relocation or increased climate resilience measures.²⁰

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is allocating \$40 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to assist with community-driven relocation of Alaska Native Villages due to climate change, erosion, and flooding.²¹

Communities receiving this funding include the Village of Kotlik, Village of Alakanuk, Native Village of Tununak, Native Village of Tuntutuliak, Native Village of Shishmaref, Chinik Eskimo Community (Golovin), and Native Village of Kwigillingok. This NRCS funding will cover feasibility studies, watershed planning and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance, and move design, and will be coordinated with the Voluntary Community-Driven Relocation Program projects led by BIA.

In addition to these historic investments through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, regularly appropriated funding across several federal agencies continues to provide much-needed assistance to communities considering or planning for community-driven relocation.

Examples

Over the past two decades, the Federal government’s support for community-driven relocation has occurred primarily through buyouts of flooded or flood-prone structures. Examples include:

- **Kinston, North Carolina.** Kinston— a city with a population of approximately 20,000 in Lenoir County— experienced repeated flood losses during the 1990s. After Hurricanes Fran, Dennis, and Floyd damaged or flooded more than 75% of the county’s homes, buyouts were offered to flood-prone properties, residents were moved to higher ground, and floodplain function along the Neuse River was restored.²² FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery grant, and North Carolina’s State Acquisition and Relocation Fund were key programs in these efforts.
- **Portland, Oregon.** The Johnson Creek Watershed, located in the southeast Portland metropolitan area, experienced nuisance flooding throughout its history, with some residential areas flooding every 1-2 years. Beginning in 1997, the City of Portland began buyouts of vulnerable properties and moving people out of the floodplain, acquiring over 107 acres and removing more than 70 structures.²³ These efforts were funded by pre-disaster funds from the City of Portland’s Bureau of Environmental Services, as well as

²⁰ [Biden-Harris Administration Makes \\$135 Million Commitment to Support Relocation of Tribal Communities Affected by Climate Change | US Department of the Interior \(DOI\) \(doi.gov\)](#)

²¹ [FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Support Indian Country and Native Communities Ahead of the Administration’s Second Tribal Nations Summit | The White House \(whitehouse.gov\)](#)

²² [Out of Harm's Way: Relocation Strategies to Reduce Flood Risk | National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\) \(noaa.gov\)](#)

²³ The City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Service, (2004). [Johnson Creek Land Acquisition Partnership and Implementation Strategy. City of Portland.](#)



grants from FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and a HUD Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery grant.

- **Linden, New Jersey.** Linden is part of the New York Metropolitan Area, approximately 13 miles southwest of Manhattan. Following Hurricane Sandy in 2012, New Jersey’s Blue Acres Buyout Program purchased 22 flood-prone properties within the waterfront Tremley Point neighborhood of Linden, and partnered with the city, local university, local businesses, engineering and construction firms, and other government agencies to preserve the area as open space for recreation and floodplain restoration.²⁴ The Blue Acres Buyout Program is supported by New Jersey state funding, as well as a HUD Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery grant, FEMA’s Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program, and FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.²⁵

The Federal government has also supported relocation of entire towns impacted by severe risks as a result of natural hazards. Examples include:

- **Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana.** Isle de Jean Charles is an island in Terrebonne Parish that is rapidly disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico due to coastal erosion and sea level rise. The majority of the residents of the island have ties to two state recognized Tribes, the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe and the United Houma Nation. The island once encompassed more than 22,000 acres and 300 families but today only 320 acres of Isle de Jean Charles remain. The sole connecting road to the mainland—Island Road, built in 1953—is often impassable due to high winds, tides, sea level rise or storm surge, necessitating relocation. In 2016, the State of Louisiana was awarded a \$43.8 million HUD Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery grant to work with island residents and stakeholders to design and implement a voluntary relocation.²⁶ In 2022, former Isle de Jean Charles residents began living at New Isle, the name of new resettlement community, an area of 515 acres with 34 newly constructed homes financed by the CDBG-DR award.
- **Newtok, Alaska.** In Newtok Village, a Yup’ik community of almost 400 residents located on the Ninglick River, is experiencing coastal erosion from ocean storms and degrading permafrost, resulting in the loss of 70 feet of shoreline per year with no cost-effective way to halt this process. The Tribal government secured land approximately 9 miles away through a federal land exchange for the new community, Mertarvik, in 2006, and families started to move there in 2019.²⁷ The Tribe installed transitional housing in Mertarvik in 2024 for the last remaining Tribal members in Newtok Village, marking a significant milestone in the Tribe’s relocation. The Voluntary Community-Driven Relocation Program, launched in November 2022, will provide a one-time investment of \$25 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, in

²⁴ [New Jersey Blue Acres Buyout Program | Urban Land Institute \(uli.org\)](#)

²⁵ [Blue Acres Program | New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection \(dep.nj.gov\)](#)

²⁶ [Isle De Jean Charles Resettlement Project | Louisiana Office of Community Development \(la.gov\)](#)

²⁷ [Newtok Village Relocation History, Planning & Land Management| State of Alaska Department of Commerce \(commerce.alaska.gov\)](#)



addition to federal funding and support from FEMA and the Denali Commission.²⁸ FEMA awarded Newtok \$6.7 million of Hazard Mitigation Grant Program assistance in March 2024 and is in the process of awarding \$8.9 million from its Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program.²⁹

- **Valmeyer, Illinois.** Valmeyer— a farming community of about 900 in southwestern Illinois— experienced massive flooding in 1993 after the Mississippi River topped its levee system, twice engulfing the majority of the town’s buildings. This led the community to relocate out of the floodplain to a new town site uphill and approximately two miles away. FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, recently established at that time, provided a mechanism for floodplain property acquisitions.^{30,31}

There are also examples of residents or communities being relocated due to environmental contamination. Some communities were relocated under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), commonly known as the Superfund program. Examples include:

- **Niagara Falls, New York.** Between 1942 and 1953, over 21,000 tons of hazardous chemicals were disposed in a makeshift landfill, which was covered with soil and leased to the Niagara Falls Board of Education. An elementary school and homes were then built in the area. The drums leaked and contaminated soil and groundwater. In 1978 and 1980, President Jimmy Carter issued emergency declarations, established the Love Canal Emergency Declaration Area, and authorized federal funding (before CERCLA) for cleanup. FEMA bought property, disbursed funds, and relocated hundreds of affected families.³² The severe contamination at Love Canal was a key event that spurred the passage of CERCLA.
- **Tar Creek, Oklahoma.** Mining for lead, cadmium, and zinc in the Tar Creek (Ottawa County) area began in the late 1800s and continued until the late 1970s. The Tar Creek Superfund site was added to the National Priorities List (NPL) in 1983. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) evaluated cleanup alternatives and selected an action that included a residential buyout, calling for a phased approach. From 2009 to 2011, EPA supported voluntary relocation of 628 residences, 74 businesses, and 125 renters in Pitcher and Cardin, Oklahoma, as well as Treece, Kansas, to protect those living in areas with concentrated sources of potential exposure.³³
- **Times Beach, Missouri.** In the early 1970s, the city of Times Beach sprayed its roads with waste oil to control dust. In 1982, EPA found the waste oil was contaminated with

²⁸ [Biden-Harris Administration Makes \\$135 Million Commitment to Support Relocation of Tribal Communities Affected by Climate Change | US Department of the Interior \(DOI\) \(doi.gov\)](#)

²⁹ [FEMA Awards \\$6.7 Million for Native Village of Newtok Relocation Efforts | Federal Environmental Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

³⁰ Pinter, N., Rees, J., (2021). *Assessing managed flood retreat and community relocation in the Midwest USA*. Natural Hazards 107 (1).

³¹ Pinter, N., (2021). *True Stories of Managed Retreat from Rising Waters*. Issues in Science and Technology 352 (4).

³² [Love Canal Site Profile | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)

³³ [Tar Creek \(Ottawa County\) Site Profile | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)



highly toxic dioxin. During the same period, the Meramec River flooded, spreading dioxin and leading to residential evacuation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended permanent relocation of evacuated residents, and EPA added the site to the NPL in 1983. EPA transferred funds from CERCLA to FEMA to pay for residents and businesses to permanently relocate. The relocation was completed by the end of 1986.³⁴

Considerations for Communities Contemplating Relocation

Relocating a community is a complex process. To be successful, many services need to be considered in the relocation process, including those listed in Box 1.

Box 1: Services needed for community relocation

- Proactive investment
- Planning (e.g., environmental review and compliance)
- Land and property acquisition (e.g., buyouts)
- Affordable housing (e.g., new construction or rehabilitation)
- Transportation infrastructure relocation (e.g., airports, docks, roads)
- Communication infrastructure relocation (e.g., broadband)
- Energy infrastructure relocation
- Water infrastructure relocation (supply, storage, stormwater, sewage)
- School relocation
- Health and human services
- Cultural and historical element relocation (e.g., cemetery)
- Waste/hazard management
- Demolition support
- Restoration of natural environment
- Support/services for existing community during relocation
 - Transportation services between old and new community locations (temporary)
 - Business development and assistance
 - Internet services
 - Essential services/emergency services
 - Education
 - Mental health
 - Moving costs

Federal agencies have authorities to cover some aspects of relocation efforts, however, partnerships with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments and other entities are often critical to secure the transfer and implementation of services needed at the new location. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to relocation; communities will need to consider their unique circumstances and plan their relocation process (including securing funding and resources) accordingly. The Alaska Division of Community and Regional Affairs' Phased Approach to

³⁴ [Superfund Sites in Reuse in Missouri | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)



Village Relocation— which provides guidance for incremental, community-driven relocation based on lessons learned from Alaska village relocations— offers steps that may be considered during a community-driven relocation process.³⁵

1. **Determining if Relocation is Necessary.** Reaching consensus on the decision to relocate can be one of the most difficult decisions a community can make. The United Nations report, *Planned Relocation, Disasters, and Climate Change*, identifies several enabling conditions for community-driven relocation: imminent danger to the community, repetitive loss of homes and infrastructure, lack of other adaptation options, a high percentage of homes in danger, increasing hazard trends, downward socio-economic trends, disruption to basic needs (e.g., clean water), and disruption to basic services (e.g., education, transit).^{36,37} Deciding to leave a place in which a community has profound spiritual, cultural, social, ecological, and physical ties can be traumatic and disruptive. While the decision to relocate should always be driven by the community, it is important that reaching this decision is informed by subject matter experts, scientists, engineers, and funding agencies, particularly because it takes a great deal of cooperation and involvement with some or all of these entities to plan and implement a relocation effort. Broad support for a community’s decision to relocate, as well as early involvement and cooperation from partners, will be helpful in the funding and technical support phase for the relocation process. Sound data collection and scientific analysis are critical in determining the need for relocation, and local and Indigenous Knowledge should also be considered throughout the process. The community should be an integral part of the data gathering and analysis, as well as the development of informed solutions.
2. **Establishing Community Capacity, Governance, Safety, and Security.** After consensus to relocate has been reached, it will be important for the community to prepare how they will work together to ensure a successful and productive relocation process. This involves ensuring the community has a supportive governance framework, has the capacity to drive a relocation process, and has addressed community safety and security until relocation can occur. Public-private partnerships are critical collaborative processes that can help with creative solutions. Many non-profit and community-based organizations have critical resources and expertise needed to advance these processes.
3. **Selecting a Relocation Site.** Once the decision to relocate has been made, the next step is a thoughtful process to determine the best location for a new site. This process involves the integration of local, Indigenous, and scientific knowledge to ensure the selected site meets the community’s socio-economic, environmental, and cultural needs, as well as meeting the physical and constructability needs to accommodate the development of a new community. The relocating community will need to coordinate with governmental

³⁵ Cox, S. R., (15 June 2023). [A Phased Approach to Village Relocation](#). Alaska Division of Community and Regional Affairs.

³⁶ [Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community-Driven Relocation | US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning \(HUD\)](#)

³⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2014). [Planned Relocation, Disasters, and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future](#).



and other entities like utilities and the receiving community and surrounding areas. The Shishmaref Relocation Site Selection Feasibility Study provides an example of this process.³⁸

4. **Planning and Construction.** After the community has made the decision to relocate, has identified a suitable, constructible place to relocate to, and has acquired site control³⁹ of the new community location, the community may conduct initial studies of the relocation site, planning and design, and construction activities.
5. **Initial Move.** A subset of the community may make an initial move to establish the new site. This subset may not live at the new community site full-time without the proper infrastructure to ensure their safety. Weather and travel conditions may limit access to and from the current site, so this may be a “temporary” or seasonal move for these community members.
6. **Transition.** The Transition Phase marks the first large-scale mobilization of community members to the new site on a year-round basis. Essential facilities will be established.
7. **Final Move.** This stage represents the final move of all community members to the new site. During this phase, the remaining homes to support the full community population will be built or relocated, and the infrastructure systems developed during the Transition Phase will be scaled to accommodate more people and more homes.
8. **Decommissioning the Old Site.** As the community and its partners plan for life at the new site, consideration for how and when to close down and eventually restore the old site is also an important priority. Such actions are often accompanied by restrictions that limit future uses of the property including but not limited to requiring the land only be put to a public use or requiring that land and waters are conserved for natural ecosystem functions and other purposes.

³⁸ AECOM Technical Services (2016). [Shishmaref Relocation Site Selection Feasibility Study](#). State of Alaska Department of Commerce.

³⁹ Site control refers to the “enforceable right to use property.” In other words, when you can show written proof that you have legal right to own and control a piece of property, you have “site control” for that property. The term “site control” is commonly used when people want to use public funds to develop or upgrade a piece of property. [State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development Division of Community and Regional Affairs | State of Alaska \(Alaska.gov\)](#)



Federal Landscape

Federal authorities to support community-driven relocation are limited. While a small subset of federal agencies has authorities applicable to relocation⁴⁰ of households or infrastructure in various contexts, many agencies have authorities to provide resources for recovery, rebuilding, and health and human services that can potentially be harnessed to better support both relocating and receiving communities.

A July 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on climate migration found that “[f]ederal programs generally are not designed to address the scale and complexity of community relocation and generally fund acquisition of properties at high risk of damage from disasters in response to a specific event such as a hurricane.” The GAO report found that this has an impact on the federal government’s ability to efficiently support relocation efforts, which in turn increases the risk to communities and federal fiscal exposure to climate risks.⁴¹

The Federal government’s authority to respond to or prepare for disasters includes the National Emergencies Act (NEA), the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), and the Public Health Service Act (PHSA). The Stafford Act is capable of addressing temporary and permanent community relocation in the face of climate-related disasters, and subject to the terms of a specific disaster declaration, by delegating authority to FEMA, HUD, and DOI to provide community relocation assistance.⁴² While the authority to acquire property and relocate communities in response to a natural disaster or national emergency is currently contained in the Stafford Act, other agencies have authorities that can provide different support to communities contemplating relocation.

The landscape of federal authorities for responding to climate- and pollution-related disasters can be difficult for communities to navigate, as the tools and programs administered by numerous agencies attempt to provide solutions based on each agency’s mission and authorities. These authorities are summarized here in two categories: programs that include property acquisition and relocation assistance or related study support and relocation support programs.

Programs That Include Property Acquisition, Relocation Assistance, or Related Study Support

While each instance of community-driven relocation looks different, acquisition of housing and infrastructure is one element that is common to all community-driven relocation. This section

⁴⁰ Historically, one of the federal government’s primary authorities for relocation assistance is through the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 4601 et. seq (URA). The URA applies to all projects using Federal financial assistance for a project involving acquisition, demolition, or rehabilitation. Relocations by the federal government using eminent domain of real property may not conceptually align with community-driven relocation, where the community voluntarily decides to relocate. However, projects with Federal financial assistance involving voluntary acquisition of housing or demolition of housing can nonetheless implicate the URA and its requirements. Opportunities to improve on the cost and schedule challenges that can be created by URA requirements are discussed in this report.

⁴¹ US Government Accountability Office, (2020). [A Climate Migration Pilot Program Could Enhance the Nation’s Resilience and Reduce Federal Fiscal Exposure](#) (GAO-20-448).

⁴² Relocation assistance under the Stafford Act would generally require issuance of a Major Disaster declaration that encompasses such activities in the disaster area. 42 U.S.C. §§ 5121.



describes the federal programs that are authorized to fund the physical (voluntary) move of a community.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

FEMA relocation assistance is provided primarily through four programs: the Public Assistance (PA) Program,⁴³ the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and HMGP Post Fire,⁴⁴ the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program,⁴⁵ and the Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) grant program associated with the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).⁴⁶ These grant programs each have specific non-federal, cost-share contribution requirements.⁴⁷ Each program is described below:

- The **Public Assistance (PA) Program** provides assistance to State, Tribal, local, and Territorial, governments, and certain types of private non-profit organizations.⁴⁸ Through PA, FEMA provides supplemental grant assistance for debris removal, emergency protective measures, and restoration and mitigation of disaster-damaged facilities. FEMA may approve funding for and require restoration of a destroyed (i.e., eligible for replacement) facility at a new location. FEMA only provides PA funding for relocation when all of the following conditions apply:
 - The facility is subject to repetitive heavy damage because of its location. For example, facilities located in a Special Flood Hazard Area or wildland-urban area subject to repetitive heavy flood or fire damage;
 - Project approval is not barred by other regulations; and
 - The overall project, including all costs, is cost-effective.⁴⁹
- The **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)** assists communities in rebuilding to become more resilient. HMGP funds mitigation projects, including the acquisition of hazard-prone homes and businesses, which enables owners to relocate to safer areas.⁵⁰ This grant funding is available after a Presidentially-declared major disaster. HMGP Post Fire funding provides hazard mitigation grant funding to State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments with a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) declaration.⁵¹ HMGP is most commonly used for relocations through a process commonly referred to as “buyouts.” This consists of a community using FEMA financial

⁴³ 44 C.F.R § 206.226(g).

⁴⁴ Section 404 of Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), Pub. L. No. 93-288, as amended 42 U.S.C. § 5170c.

⁴⁵ Section 203 of the Stafford Act (42 U.S.C. §5133).

⁴⁶ Section 1366 of the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, as amended 42 U.S.C. § 4104c.

⁴⁷ [Hazard Mitigation Assistance Program and Policy Guide | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#); [Public Assistance Hazard Mitigation | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

⁴⁸ [Public Assistance Hazard Mitigation | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

⁴⁹ If the cost to relocate the facility is less than the eligible cost to replace the facility at its original location (the value of the land at the original site is not included as part of this evaluation), then the project is cost-effective. In instances where the cost of relocation exceeds the cost to replace the facility at its original location, FEMA may use its Benefit Cost Analysis (BCA) process and software to determine cost effectiveness.

⁵⁰ [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program \(HMGP\) | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

⁵¹ [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Post Fire | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)



assistance to purchase property from a voluntary seller and, when feasible, to relocate the structures on a property outside of the hazard-prone area. The acquired property is to be dedicated and used in perpetuity for open space for the conservation of natural floodplain functions.⁵² Under this program, FEMA provides funding to the states, Territories, and Tribes, who in turn can provide it to local jurisdictions with a FEMA-approved local hazard mitigation plan in place. HMGP requires a cost share equivalent to as much as 25% of the federal investment.

- The **Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program** is a competitive grant program that supports states, local communities, Tribes, and Territories in shifting the focus away from reactive disaster spending and toward research-supported, proactive investment in community resilience. The program funds cost-effective projects designed to increase resilience, reduce injuries and loss of life, and reduce damage and destruction to property. BRIC projects demonstrate innovative approaches to partnerships, such as shared funding mechanisms, and/or project design and focus on infrastructure projects benefitting disadvantaged communities, nature-based solutions, climate resilience and adaptation, and adopting hazard resistant building codes. Eligible applicants can use BRIC funding for property acquisition. BRIC funding is distributed on a nationally competitive basis rather than to states based on disaster activity.⁵³ In Fiscal Year 2023, all states and Territories and the District of Columbia were eligible to apply.⁵⁴ BRIC includes a Tribal set aside, state and Territory allocations, and allows a federal share of up to 90% for “small impoverished communities.”⁵⁵
- The **Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) Grant Program** is a competitive grant program that provides funding to states, local communities, federally recognized Tribes, and Territories. Funds can be used for projects, including property buyouts, that reduce or eliminate the risk of repetitive flood damage to buildings insured by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).⁵⁶ Funding for FMA is annually appropriated and funded by premium collections from NFIP policyholders. Under FMA,⁵⁷ FEMA provides funding on a competitive basis, but only to local jurisdictions that participate in the NFIP. FMA targets buyouts of repeatedly flooded properties that are also NFIP-insured properties (cost share depends on the history of loss and payments). The program does not provide funding to communities not participating in the NFIP.

⁵² 44 C.F.R. Part 80.

⁵³ The BRIC program was added by the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA) of 2018. In FEMA POLICY FP-104-008-05, [Mitigation Assistance: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities](#), FEMA clarified that the DRRA through Section 1234, National Public Infrastructure Pre-Disaster Hazard Mitigation, “amended authority in Section 203 by discontinuing the PDM grant program and establishing the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program via this policy, associated program implementation materials, and notices of funding opportunity (NOFOs). FEMA will fund BRIC from a six-percent set-aside of estimated disaster expenses for each major disaster, as authorized by Section 203(i).”

⁵⁴ [Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

⁵⁵ Pre-disaster Hazard Mitigation, 42 U.S.C. § 5133.

⁵⁶ [Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program | Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) \(fema.gov\)](#)

⁵⁷ Section 1366 of the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, as amended 42 U.S.C. § 4104c.



FEMA's authority to conduct buyouts is limited to voluntary (on the part of the property owner), technically feasible, and cost-effective acquisitions. Per 44 CFR 80.11(e), "eligible properties include only those that are not contaminated with hazardous materials, except for incidental demolition and household hazardous waste." Therefore, FEMA programs do not address pollution-related buyouts that involve hazardous materials.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

HUD primarily provides relocation assistance through: the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), and Community Development Block Grant – Mitigation (CDBG-MIT).⁵⁸ These grants primarily benefit low- and moderate-income persons and, among other eligible activities, can be used to build and rehabilitate housing. These programs are described below:

- The **Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)**⁵⁹ provides annual formula grants to states, local governments, and insular areas for housing and community development activities primarily benefitting non-Tribal, low- and moderate-income people.⁶⁰ Eligible activities include acquisition and rehabilitation of housing and acquisition of real property that could provide receiving locations for relocating households. HUD also runs the Section 108 Loan Guarantee program, which allows CDBG grantees to leverage their annual grant allocation to access low-cost, flexible financing for a variety of eligible activities, including construction or installation of public facilities, and other infrastructure improvement projects.
- **CDBG Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR)**⁶¹ and **CDBG Mitigation (CDBG-MIT)** support disaster recovery and mitigation under ad hoc supplemental appropriations (i.e., these funds are not permanently authorized). These funds supplement the primary disaster assistance programs administered by FEMA, the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the US Army Corps of Engineers for infrastructure, housing, and economic revitalization. Relocations funded under CDBG-DR are similar to FEMA buyout programs in many ways but distinguish buyouts from acquisitions. For buyouts, the owners are paid a pre-disaster value, and their land must remain undeveloped. For acquisitions, properties can be used for other purposes and receive fair market post disaster value.⁶² CDBG-DR funds have no federal requirements for matching or cost

⁵⁸ Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, 12 U.S.C. § 1706e.

⁵⁹ The program is authorized under Title 1 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, Pub. L. 93-383, as amended (42 U.S.C. § 5301 et seq).

⁶⁰ Entitlement grantees, every metropolitan area with at least 50,000 people, specifically designated large cities, and every county with a population of more than 200,000, receive 70% of all CDBG funds. The remaining 30% go to non-entitlement grantees. 24 C.F.R. part 570; [Programs of HUD - 2024 | US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) \(hud.gov\)](#)

⁶¹ CDBG-DR assistance is also subject to applicable requirements in 2 CFR part 200 and some of the requirements of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), Pub. L. 93-288, as amended 42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq. that apply to Federal disaster assistance.

⁶² The Pew Charitable Trusts, (1 April 2022). [Property Buyouts Can Be an Effective Solution for Flood-Prone Communities.](#)



share and can be used to fulfill cost-share requirements from other relocation grant programs.

HUD also provides relocation assistance to Tribes through the Indian Community Development Block Grant and the Indian Housing Block Grant:

- The **Indian Community Development Block Grant (ICDBG)** provides eligible grantees with direct grants for use in developing Indian and Alaska Native communities, including the provision of decent housing, a suitable living environment, and economic opportunities, primarily for low- and moderate-income persons.⁶³ The ICDBG provides single purpose grants, which are awarded on a competitive basis, as well as imminent threat grants, which are awarded first come, first served to lessen or eliminate problems which pose an imminent threat to the health and safety of Tribal residents.
- The **Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG)** is a formula grant that provides a range of affordable housing activities on Indian reservations and Indian areas. The block grant approach to housing for Native Americans was enabled by the Native American Housing Assistance and Self Determination Act of 1996.⁶⁴ HUD also administers a competitive version of the IHBG program.

See the HUD Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community-Driven Relocation for more information.⁶⁵

U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI)

DOI's Bureau of Indian Affairs provides funding to Tribes through the Tribal Climate Resilience Annual Awards Program to support climate preparedness and resilience for all federally recognized Tribal Nations and Alaska Native villages through technical and financial assistance, access to scientific resources, and educational opportunities. The program is described below:

- The **Tribal Climate Resilience (TCR) Annual Awards Program** is a competitive grant program to support both planning and implementation projects, including for climate adaptation planning, community-led relocation, managed retreat (i.e., partial relocation), protect-in-place, current and future climate change impacts on Tribal Treaty and Trust resources, economies, regenerative agriculture and food sovereignty, conservation practices, infrastructure, human health and safety, and habitat restoration or improvements.⁶⁶ Awards are open to all federally recognized Tribes and Tribal organizations as defined in 25 U.S.C. section 5304(l). Awards are typically made through P.L. 93-638 contracts.⁶⁷ To the extent that other federal programs require matching funds

⁶³ [Tribal Climate Resilience and Adaptation Funding | US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) \(hud.gov\)](https://www.hud.gov/programs/tribal-climate-resilience-and-adaptation-funding)

⁶⁴ [Tribal Climate Resilience and Adaptation Funding | US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) \(hud.gov\)](https://www.hud.gov/programs/tribal-climate-resilience-and-adaptation-funding)

⁶⁵ [Climate Resilience Implementation Guide: Community-Driven Relocation | US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\) \(hud.gov\)](https://www.hud.gov/programs/tribal-climate-resilience-implementation-guide)

⁶⁶ [Tribal Climate Resilience \(TCR\) Annual Awards Program | Bureau of Indian Affairs \(BIA\) \(bia.gov\)](https://www.bia.gov/programs/tribal-climate-resilience-annual-awards-program).

⁶⁷ Read about Pub. L. 93-638, subpart J in full at https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/assets/bia/ots/ots/pdf/Public_Law93-638.pdf



from Tribes, and the activity is identified in an existing plan, the TCR awards can be used as a federal match as they are under P.L. 93-638.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

To protect lives and property in communities affected by flooding or severe soil erosion due to a natural disaster, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can fund floodplain easements or property buyouts through its Emergency Watershed Protection Program. This and other NRCS programs that can assist with flooding risks are described below:

- The **Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program** offers technical and financial assistance to help local communities relieve imminent threats to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural disasters that impair a watershed.⁶⁸ EWP does not require a disaster declaration by federal or state government officials for program assistance to begin – an NRCS State Conservationist can declare a local watershed emergency and initiate EWP program assistance in cooperation with an eligible sponsor. EWP can fund land acquisition through federally purchased and held floodplain easements or through recovery buyouts where the land in the floodplain is purchased and deed restricted by a sponsor. Both these options allow for demolition or relocation of existing structures and restoration of the site to restore floodplain functions. These USDA programs usually involve permanent easements that restrict uses to protect floodplain function, as well as providing 100% of the funding for the land and restoration.⁶⁹
- The **Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program** provides technical and financial assistance to states, local governments, and Tribal organizations to help plan and implement authorized watershed projects for the purpose of flood prevention (including structural and land treatment measures), watershed protection, public recreation, public fish and wildlife, agricultural water management, municipal and industrial water supply, and water quality management.⁷⁰ Flood damage reduction and mitigation measures can reduce or prevent floodwater damages by reducing runoff, erosion, and sediment; modifying the susceptibility of improvement in the floodplain to damage; removing damageable property from the floodplain; or reducing the frequency, depth, or velocity of flooding. Measures may also include actions that prevent encroachment into the floodplain. Each project must contain benefits directly related to agriculture, including rural communities, that account for at least 20 percent of the total benefits of the project.⁷¹

⁶⁸ [Emergency Watershed Protection | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) \(nrcs.gov\)](#).

⁶⁹ [Floodplain Easement Option Factsheet | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) \(nrcs.gov\)](#)

⁷⁰ [Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations \(WFPO\) Program | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) \(nrcs.gov\)](#)

⁷¹ 16 U.S.C. § 1002 (3).



Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) provides EPA's Superfund Program the authority to select and conduct cleanups at sites on the National Priorities List (NPL) and beyond.⁷² Under CERCLA, prioritizing protection of human health that does not require communities to leave their homes remains paramount.⁷³ Relocation within the Superfund program, when selected as a component of a CERCLA response action, is described below:

- For relocation selected under CERCLA as a response action to address environmental contamination or pollution, EPA can work with its federal partners and at certain sites, liable parties, to implement relocation of businesses and residents under the **Superfund Program**.⁷⁴ EPA can fund community relocations as a remedial action to protect against the effects of pollution through CERCLA.⁷⁵ A determination, consistent with the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan is required to the effect that relocation is more cost-effective and environmentally preferable to alternative strategies to protect public health from exposure to hazardous substances. Where statutory and regulatory criteria are met, relocation may be an important component of a response action, which may help to remedy severe instances of environmental injustice, such as longstanding, unremediated pollution. Private parties, local governments and other non-EPA entities may also implement relocation at or near Superfund sites voluntarily, outside of CERCLA authority.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Flood risk management is one of USACE Civil Works' three core missions. Relocation under this program is project-specific and only used as a last resort. When land is needed to construct a project or when land is needed to provide flood risk reduction, USACE may be authorized by Congress, on a project-by-project basis, to relocate a community to meet the needs of the project. This may or may not be voluntary. So, while this program has an authority to acquire and move households and infrastructure, it historically has not been used for voluntary relocation efforts. The program is described below:

- The **Flood Risk Management Program** works across USACE to reduce overall flood risk, which includes the appropriate use and resilience of structures such as levees and floodwalls, as well as promoting alternatives when other approaches (e.g., land acquisition, flood proofing, etc.) reduce the risk of loss of life, reduce long-term economic damages to the public and private sector, and improve the natural environment.⁷⁶ The cost-share for flood risk management projects that are individually

⁷² [Summary of the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)

⁷³ 42 U.S.C. § 9621 (a) and (b); 40 C.F.R. §300.430; US Environmental Protection Agency (1999). *Interim Policy on the Use of Permanent Relocations as Part of Superfund Remedial Actions*.

⁷⁴ [Superfund Relocation Information | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)

⁷⁵ Sections 104(a) and 101(24) of Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 9601 et seq.

⁷⁶ [Flood Risk Management Program | US Army Corps of Engineers \(USACE\) \(usace.gov\)](#)



authorized by Congress would be 65% federal and 35% non-federal for non-structural projects. The non-federal cost-share could be up to 50% for structural projects.⁷⁷

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

NOAA supports relocation and broader adaptation considerations through grant funding to communities and by improving the nation's understanding and predictions of changes in climate, weather, ocean, and coasts to better help communities plan for future climatic impacts. NOAA's National Coastal Resilience Fund supports adaptation and/or planning for community-driven relocation and may support decommissioning of previous community sites. This program is described below:

- The **National Coastal Resilience Fund (NCRF)** is a partnership between NOAA and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to increase and strengthen natural infrastructure to protect coastal communities while also enhancing habitats for fish and wildlife.⁷⁸ Through this program, eligible applicants can fund the decommissioning of buildings and ecological restoration of previous community sites.

Relocation Support Programs

While the programs above are federal programs to support property acquisition, study, and other efforts related to physical relocation of a community, the Federal government can also support a broader suite of services that may be needed during community relocation (Box 1). A 2022 Government Accountability Office report concluded that 30 different federal agencies have authority to support community recovery following natural disasters (Figure 1).⁷⁹ The interagency community recovery work across the six Recovery Support Functions identified in Figure 1 is coordinated through the Recovery Support Function Leadership Group to carry out the National Disaster Recovery Framework. Furthermore, the recently designated Community Disaster Resilience Zones (CDRZ)⁸⁰ and interagency assistance programs like the Thriving Communities Network,⁸¹ Rural Partners Network,⁸² and the National Silver Jackets Team,⁸³ may provide opportunities or resources to identify and connect to communities, including communities that may consider relocation, and provide pathways for technical assistance and resources.

⁷⁷ [Flood Risk Management | US Army Corps of Engineers \(USACE\) \(usace.gov\)](#)

⁷⁸ [National Coastal Resilience Fund | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\) \(noaa.gov\)](#).

⁷⁹ Government Accountability Office. 2022. [Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach](#).

⁸⁰ On September 6, 2023, FEMA announced the first 483 [Community Disaster Resilience Zones](#) in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. FEMA used the National Risk Index and the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool to identify the census tracts across the country with the highest risk to natural hazards and those most in need.

⁸¹ [Thriving Communities Network \(TCN\) | US Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) \(epa.gov\)](#)

⁸² [Rural Partners Network | US Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) \(rural.gov\)](#)

⁸³ [Silver Jackets | US Army Corps of Engineers \(USACE\) \(usace.gov\)](#)

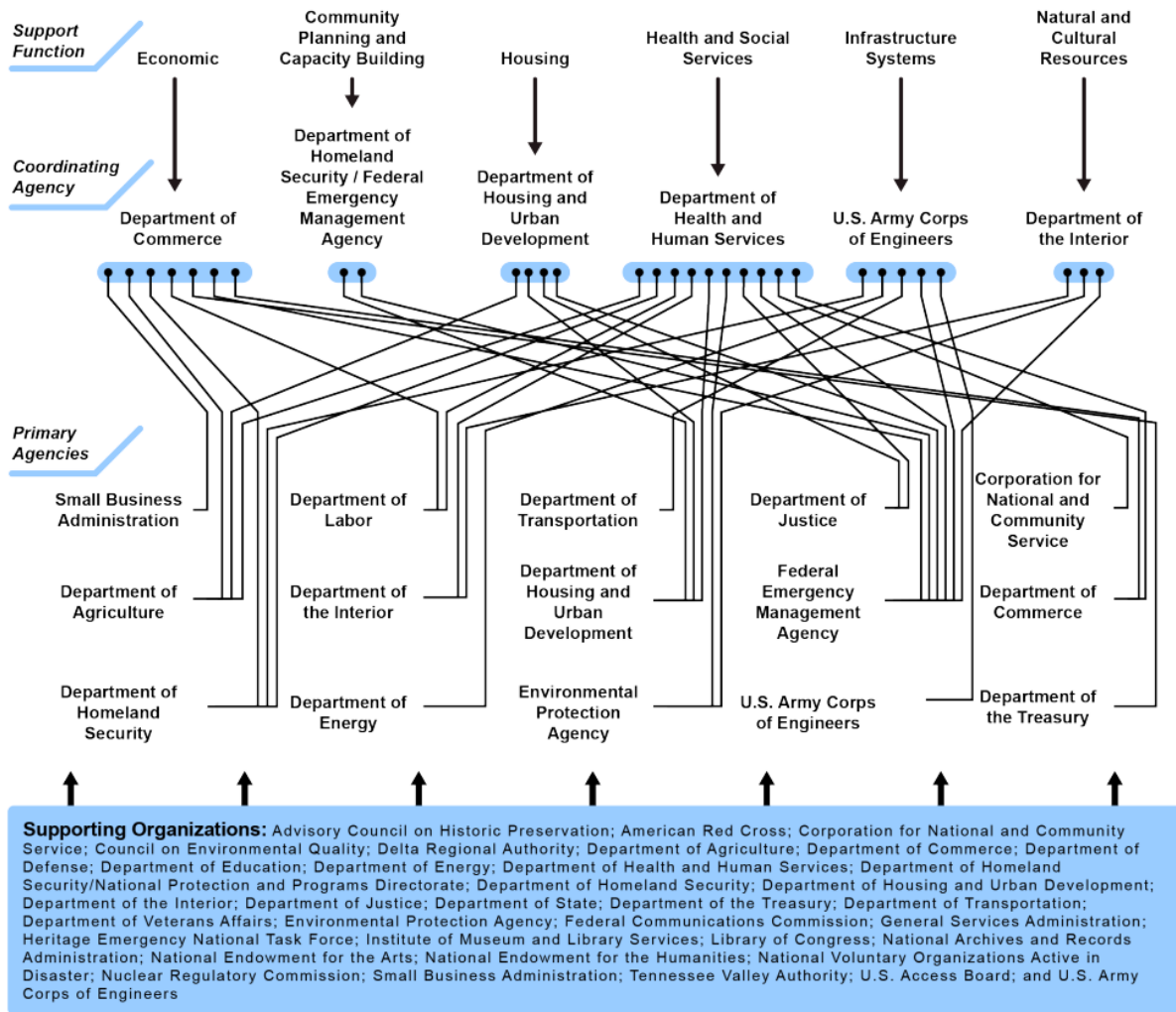


Figure 1: Recovery support functions and the federal entities involved in disaster recovery⁸⁴

Beyond Buyouts

To date, the Federal government has primarily supported relocations through mechanisms such as buyouts focused on individual properties. Buyouts can be complicated and slow-moving.^{85,86} One cause of the long buyout process is the complexity of the funding application review and approval process.⁸⁷ After a disaster, it can take 6-18 months for buyout applications to be submitted and reviewed at the state-level, before being sent to the relevant federal agency, where

⁸⁴ Government Accountability Office. 2022. [Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach](#).

⁸⁵ Gout, E., (2021). [Are Buyouts a Viable Tool for Climate Adaptation? – State of the Planet](#). News from the [Columbia Climate School](#).

⁸⁶ Weber, A., Moore, R., (2019). [Going Under: Long Wait Times for Post-Flood Buyouts Leave Homeowners Underwater](#). NRDC.

⁸⁷ Siders, A.R., Gerber-Chavez, L., (2021). [Floodplain Buyouts: Challenges, Practices, and Lessons Learned](#). The University of Delaware and The Nature Conservancy.



it can take another one to two years to complete the reviews and award the funds.⁸⁸ The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Act, for example, imposes legal requirements on many projects when federal funding is used, and that involves procedures that can be costly and time-intensive. The process can be even longer depending on state capacity to conduct the time-consuming damage assessments and benefit-cost analyses required to receive federal aid. If state funding is used to meet the federal cost-share requirement, additional applications and reviews are needed, further extending the timeline.

FEMA has taken a number of steps to ease this process in recent years, including introducing a new method to simplify the benefit-cost analyses through pre-calculated benefits, developing a uniform application that reduces complexity, and investing in capacity support for states and communities on hazard mitigation planning.⁸⁹ Despite these efforts, the existence of cost-share requirements and limited local capacity puts buyouts out of reach for many lower-income communities, especially those renting, who are not eligible for buyouts at all.

By moving from the current buyout-first landscape, relocation programs can evolve to address the broader suite of needs associated with relocation. If entire communities move, they will need new land, water, energy, and transportation infrastructure; schools and healthcare facilities; transition support for both services in the place they are currently living, as well as the place they will be relocating to; and resources to restore the lands and waters they leave behind. For families whose homes are lost, or for those who cannot or do not want to rebuild or remain where they live, they need comparable homes, jobs, schools, and social services. And communities who are receiving or are adjacent to communities relocating from climate- or pollution-stressed areas may need to expand affordable housing and other services to accommodate new residents.

The current landscape of programs and funding can create challenges for federal agencies to support community-driven relocation in an efficient manner. Communities must work across different platforms at the federal level with different agencies to piece together sources of funding subject to different rules and timeframes. Compounding the issue, much of the funding that can be used for community-driven relocation is available episodically, in response to disaster declarations or as a result of annual funding competitions. The following “Federal Actions to Improve Support for Community-Driven Relocation” outlines key actions the Federal government can develop to improve support of community-driven relocation efforts.

⁸⁸ Siders, A.R., Gerber-Chavez, L., (2021). [Floodplain Buyouts: Challenges, Practices, and Lessons Learned](#). The University of Delaware and The Nature Conservancy.

⁸⁹ Government Accountability Office, (2022). [Flood Mitigation: Actions Needed to Improve Use of FEMA Property Acquisitions](#), GAO-22-104694.



Federal Actions to Improve Support for Community-Driven Relocation

There are many actions the Federal government can take to make progress towards the vision of federally-supported community-driven relocation for communities severely impacted by climate hazards and pollution. Following the Guiding Principles outlined above, consistent with applicable law, foundational activities the Federal government can assess and develop to support comprehensive community-driven relocation include:

Near-Term Actions

- **Analyze current federal authorities to support community-driven relocation.** A foundational action for all federal departments and agencies is to identify their current authorities, activities, and potential mechanisms that could strengthen their capacity to support community-driven relocation. This should build on the high-level overview above, and include the authorities that relate to climate-driven relocation, as well as to other environmental hazard-related relocation (e.g., Superfund or other legacy pollution).
- **Create a national technical assistance network of partners to support climate- and pollution-related community-driven relocation.** This network of non-governmental partners should have varied individualized skillsets that could collectively and on a peer-to-peer basis provide robust support to communities facing climate- and pollution-related risks with relocation planning across the United States. Activities pursued by this network could help fill knowledge gaps as federal agencies try to better understand the needs, challenges, and successes of climate- and/or pollution-induced community relocation, while also providing communities the direct outreach and support they need to plan for relocation and access federal resources. This network should provide avenues to convene and exchange information with communities about near- and medium-term risks, conversations that might precipitate consideration of community-driven relocation.
- **Develop and update an inventory of resources supporting climate- and pollution-related community-driven relocation.** Federal agencies should work with the [Mitigation Framework Leadership Group \(MitFLG\)](#) and the [Recovery Support Function Leadership Group \(RSFLG\)](#) to update the [Recovery and Resilience Resource Library](#) housed on FEMA.gov to facilitate navigation of the numerous programs available to support relocation for communities in the United States and its Territories. The resources are intended for State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments, as well as nonprofits, businesses, healthcare institutions, schools, individuals, and households. The library should be designed to help users find and research federal resources that could support community-driven relocation. Some library resources may not reflect community-driven relocation projects directly, but nonetheless may be useful information for communities to access. For example, EPA could work to ensure that public-facing resources related to CERCLA/Superfund programs contain appropriate reference to relocation policies and



that communities are aware of such information as early as possible in any remediation process.

- **Continue to provide support to the ongoing Tribal Voluntary Community-Driven Relocation Program.** Understanding and supporting the unique needs of Tribal Nations is paramount. Building on the momentum of the CDR Subcommittee, the federal interagency coordination for the [demonstration projects supported by BIA, USDA, and others](#) should continue and expand to include expertise from EPA in pollution-related relocation. This effort would support the staff who are directly providing support services and funding to Tribes and ensure that federal agencies are learning from BIA and DOI to understand the specific needs of Tribes and working together to remove barriers for Tribal communities.
- **Collaborate with the Denali Commission to explore possible coordination of community-driven relocation resources for Alaska.** Federal agencies supporting community-driven relocation in Alaska are encouraged to coordinate with the Denali Commission, which has extensive experience and established connections to state and local stakeholders. This collaboration could reduce the complexity of establishing mutual frameworks and respective responsibilities, align resilience missions, and address critical resilience goals in Alaska.

Intermediate-Term Actions

- **Assess and determine where it is most feasible to build federal interagency communities of practice and establish knowledge-sharing platforms.** At a minimum, FEMA, BIA, and HUD should establish communities of practice to share knowledge, encourage discussion, and increase coordination of community-driven relocation efforts within their agencies. Communities of practice should hold listening sessions to identify topics of interest and host webinars or facilitated discussions to increase staff expertise on climate- and pollution-driven relocation. Additionally, interagency learning should be incorporated into these communities of practice.
- **Build a training program on community-driven relocation.** Supporting communities that wish to relocate to address severe climate- and pollution-related threats is a relatively new endeavor. Federal agency staff and State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments and their partners may not have experience navigating processes needed to support relocation. Federal agencies could work to identify capacity to support a new shared learning network that would host webinars for federal agency staff and their partners in State, Tribal, local and Territorial governments.
- **Develop products and materials to be shared broadly with Federal, State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments, highlighting resources and lessons learned from community-driven relocation efforts.** Federal agencies should work to develop a series of materials that could include webinars, white papers, and/or other relevant products on community-driven relocation efforts, share leading practices, and resources available. Agencies could consider how to foster peer-to-peer learning and make connections across



communities from different areas and at different phases in the process of community-driven relocation.

- **Analyze potential statutory, policy, regulatory and budgetary gaps that affect federal support for community-driven relocation, where relevant.** Agencies should consider how to better respond to slow-onset climate hazards and environmental contaminants that are significantly affecting health, safety, and livelihoods in their programs. Federal agencies should continue to share ideas and analyses, and coordinate on an overarching framework for such proposal ideas as appropriate within budget, policy, and regulatory procedures.
- **Review, and if appropriate, amend or update relevant policy and guidance documents to enhance support for community-driven relocation.** Federal agencies can pursue efforts within existing authorities such as updating notices of funding opportunities to ensure that community-driven relocation-related activities are supported, and inclusive (e.g., including residents in addition to property owners). In another example, there is policy and guidance regarding relocation of communities under CERCLA that dates back to the 1999 Interim Policy and the Use of Permanent Relocations as Part of Superfund Remedial Action which may benefit from a review and potential update. This review should take into account public and Tribal input, contemporary conditions, new developments, and implementation experience.
- **Support monitoring and evaluation of federally-supported community-driven relocation.** Federal agencies should identify ways federal programs can facilitate better monitoring and evaluation of relocation. This could include partnerships with non-federal partners to support monitoring and evaluation activities.

Long-Term Opportunities for Action

Building the capacity to enhance support for community-driven relocation in cases of severe threats requires a coordinated whole-of-government endeavor, drawing from programs across agencies. It is also critical that the current gaps in federal capacity are identified so they can be understood by State, Tribal, local, or Territorial governments and non-governmental partners. Opportunities over the long-term include evolutions in the funding and coordination elements behind community-driven relocation efforts. A long-term funding model, partnered with robust technical assistance, would enable communities to align funding availability with a project management process that meets resilience needs (e.g., planning, design, and then implementation for each phase of work). Centralizing funding qualifications and application processes would also provide a benefit. On the coordination front, centralizing and clarifying the federal role across agencies should remain the goal. Where possible, community navigators could coordinate federal engagement and serve as a main point of contact for communities working across federal programs. This will provide more efficiency and better results for communities.

Community-driven relocation should be a holistic tool for federal agencies, connected to whole-of-government strategies to build community climate resilience and address harmful pollution. To relocate residents, communities will need to build replacement affordable and resilient housing and infrastructure, restore vacated lands and waters to provide natural barriers that provide resilience (e.g., wetlands that provide flood protection), ensure that the new locations are not polluted, and bolster homes and infrastructure that remain at-risk. Relocation needs to be



embedded in planning efforts and these larger community strategies, all of which would benefit from a cohesive federal framework. A 2020 GAO report examines recent community-driven relocation efforts and makes various recommendations about how such a framework could benefit community-driven relocation efforts over the long-term.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Across the country, hazards, both natural and human-made, are increasing, meaning more communities will be at greater risk of direct impacts. Community-driven relocation can be an effective strategy to advance environmental justice and to create a more climate-resilient nation. The Biden-Harris Administration has taken concrete steps to improve the coordination and delivery of federal programs and resources to support communities considering or pursuing relocation in the face of climate- and pollution-related risks. The release of this report demonstrates the Administration's focus on the challenges of community-driven relocation. Moving forward, the Federal government needs to be prepared to enhance its support for communities who are considering or who have determined they must relocate and foster partnerships with State, Tribal, local, and Territorial governments who have key roles to play in this endeavor. The opportunities for action identified in this report recognize the needs of these communities and provide foundational activities the Federal government can assess and develop to support comprehensive community-driven relocation.

As the Federal government works to advance support for community-driven relocation, the communities themselves are providing critical insights. Stakeholders have called for federal support for community-driven relocation that is flexible, robust, and addresses the full suite of relocation needs of diverse communities and community partners. That support needs to be sustained over time and provide services that address the needs of relocating individuals, neighborhoods or communities, and receiving communities. The Federal government will continue to engage with the public, especially the communities considering or pursuing relocation, as well as receiving communities, to provide support that meets community needs.

⁹⁰ United States Government Accountability Office, (2020). [A Climate Migration Pilot Program Could Enhance the Nation's Resilience and Reduce Federal Fiscal Exposure](#) (GAO 20-488).