



INVESTIGATIONS

Internal Documents Show FEMA Is Relearning The Same Lessons About Emergencies

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LAURA SULLIVAN

Leaked internal briefings to the White House show FEMA is struggling with problems of staffing, contracting and supplies in the COVID-19 pandemic despite years of promises of changing processes.

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

During a disaster, Americans turn to FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, for help. New internal documents obtained by NPR reveal some of the challenges FEMA is having while managing the 50-state spread of the coronavirus. They provide a daily snapshot of the virus for top officials. NPR's Laura Sullivan has gotten a look at these internal documents that FEMA is providing each day to the administration about the pandemic, and she joins us now.

Hi, Laura.

LAURA SULLIVAN, BYLINE: Hey, Ari.

SHAPIRO: So what are these documents? And what do they show?

SULLIVAN: These come from top-level daily briefings FEMA sends to the White House and to other agencies, and what they're revealing are some areas where FEMA is struggling. And these are areas where FEMA has historically had problems. According to the documents, they've deployed just 2,800 personnel for the entire country as of yesterday. That's close to the number the agency deployed just for Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria.

SHAPIRO: Wow.

SULLIVAN: I mean, FEMA's mandate is to purchase supplies, get them to places in need and get them handed out. And now this is a different kind of crisis, but the agency is still supposed to respond in all 50 states and territories, and that kind of effort requires a lot of manpower. When I asked FEMA about this, they acknowledged that staffing is low. But they say that some staff are working remotely and that the agency wants to save employees, they say, in case there is another disaster. Two sources close to FEMA, however, told me that the agency is having a hard time getting qualified supervisors and staff into place.

SHAPIRO: We've been hearing about states struggling to get supplies; in some cases, banding together to try to purchase items. What do these documents say about how the agency is managing those crucial medical supplies?

SULLIVAN: Well, according to the records, as - early this week, private American companies donated more masks, gloves and gowns to the COVID effort than FEMA has been able to procure through its own vending process. I took a look at the agency's contracts, and there appears to be a number of issues. The federal records show that the agency only began contracting for much of the needed supplies in the past week or two. This is something FEMA's supposed to set up before disaster strikes. And many of the contractors appear to be companies neither FEMA nor the federal government has ever used before, which add weeks of delays.

SHAPIRO: Shocking that that only would have happened within the last couple of weeks. As you well know - you've reported on this criticism of FEMA during previous disasters - this is not new - I mean, Hurricane Katrina, for example.

SULLIVAN: That's right. After Hurricane Katrina, Congress told FEMA to line up contracts in advance so it's not searching around and vetting companies in the middle of a crisis. FEMA struggled with this again during the 2018 storm season, where it was trying to find tarps, food and water long after the hurricanes hit, leading to months-long delays and sometimes wholly unqualified companies that never ended up delivering.

The agency promised change, but there still seem to be these same problems. The agency contracted for \$96 million worth of medical supplies two weeks ago, but that contract fell apart only days later. And the documents show the agency still hasn't been able to produce more than 30,000 surgical gowns, for example, from vendors even though the states have been asking for millions of them.

SHAPIRO: At this point, FEMA has a lot of experience sending in supplies after a hurricane or a fire. Do you think it's just been caught off guard by a national medical pandemic like this one?

SULLIVAN: Well, pandemics are on FEMA's list of crises that it's supposed to prepare for. In a report just out this past July, the agency's own officials warned that a national pandemic could lead to a shortage of, quote, "medical supplies, equipment, beds and health care workers." So this is something that they knew in advance. FEMA officials told me they have provided millions of supplies so far. They're working to get supplies where they're needed. They've set up a successful air transit system. They also said leaning on private companies for donations is a good thing, and that's true. But taxpayers fund FEMA every year so that the agency won't need to.

SHAPIRO: NPR's Laura Sullivan, thanks for your reporting.

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