

Wildfire Recovery and Resilience: HUD Funding to Examine Effectiveness

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On May 18, 2022, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) posted a [Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#) soliciting study proposals to examine the effectiveness of federal, state, and local disaster recovery funding responding to wildfires. The NOFO states the following:

HUD anticipates the need for such knowledge because in recent years wildfire disasters have become more frequent and destructive and HUD has sharply increased allocations of disaster assistance for wildfires through the [Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR\)](#) and [Community Development Block Grant-Mitigation \(CDBG-MIT\)](#) programs.

Congress has appropriated such supplemental CDBG funding to assist certain relief and recovery efforts [since 1992](#). Allocations of these funds for wildfires have significantly increased in recent years: roughly, 79% of the supplemental CDBG funding for wildfire recovery or mitigation has been allocated since 2017.

This NOFO draws upon funds provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 ([P.L. 116-260](#)) to support various research efforts, facilitated by HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R), including [a study to examine the effectiveness](#) of disaster recovery funds administered by HUD. HUD's purpose in commissioning this research is to enhance resilience against wildfires by strengthening community capacity for utilizing various forms of disaster assistance, with a particular focus on supporting low- and moderate-income individuals and areas. Studies such as those funded through the HUD Wildfire and Resilience Grant Opportunity, could inform future federal investments in long-term recovery and resilience for specific types of disasters.

Funding Opportunity

The [HUD NOFO](#) makes available up to \$600,000 and no less than \$200,000 for at least one [cooperative agreement](#) to study a community or multiple communities that sustained damage from a presidentially declared wildfire disaster since 2017. The opportunity is open to a range of public sector, tribal, nonprofit, higher education, and for-profit and small business entities. At least one of the communities in a funded

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study must have also received CDBG-DR or CDBG-MIT funding for the eligible wildfire. HUD intends for the funded research to identify promising methods for the use of disaster assistance to strengthen resilience of low- and moderate-income communities against the biophysical and social effects of wildfires.

Participants in a cooperative agreement covered by the NOFO are to conduct research using a [community study methodology](#). The funded study or studies will seek to answer the following five questions:

1. “As part of recovery from wildfire disaster, how do communities consider and prioritize activities intended to increase resilience to wildfire—including biophysical and social factors, and individual and collective actions?”
2. “How does disaster recovery and mitigation funding influence these processes and priorities?”
3. “What are the positive, negative, and neutral impacts of activities supported by disaster recovery or mitigation funds on the resilience to wildfire of low- and moderate-income persons and communities?”
4. “What recovery activities could be supported by disaster recovery and mitigation funding that would enhance the resilience to wildfire of low- and moderate-income persons and communities, but have not been, or usually are not implemented?”
5. “How do low- and moderate-income members of wildfire-affected communities conceive of and define resilience to wildfire and how would they measure community resilience to wildfire?”

According to the NOFO, HUD expects that the funded research will provide an overview of the types of federal, state, local, and private sources of disaster recovery and resilience assistance, and the activities that they support. Additionally, the research is expected to examine the efficacy of these recovery activities, and provide insight on experiences with social exclusion from assistance on the basis of citizenship, homelessness, race or ethnicity, disability, and/or other relevant factors in the study area or areas.

Concluding Observations

The cooperative agreement opportunity might help to fill current gaps in research as it relates to the use of HUD assistance for wildfire recovery, as well as detailed analysis of the broader coordination of wildfire recovery resources. [Some past HUD funded studies](#) have examined HUD efforts primarily focused on housing-related relief, recovery, or resilience in response to, or preparation for disasters.

A [2019 HUD funded study](#) examined the length of CDBG-DR housing activity completion times and factors that may contribute to variance among grantees. Although the study was narrowly focused on a specific aspect of one federal resource for disaster recovery, the associated report included some [findings](#) and [recommendations](#) related to the broader federal disaster recovery system. [The report identified a need for improvements](#) to the federal approach to disaster recovery and resilience, which would extend beyond enhancements to the delivery and administration of HUD assistance, such as CDBG-DR:

By focusing solely on improvements in the timing of CDBG-DR’s disaster recovery programs, we lose sight of the potential to first, embrace mitigation and preparation before disaster strikes; and second, define the shared and equitable roles across government and citizens for mitigation and preparation that shape the cost-effectiveness and timeliness of housing recovery.

It is unclear whether the NOFO was designed with these recommendations in mind. Nonetheless, the NOFO suggests that HUD is seeking to understand the landscape of wildfire recovery resources and the factors that contribute to strengthened resilience from future wildfires, born out of the recovery process.

As indicated above, HUD also expects that the study or studies will include perspectives from a diverse group of participants, with potential insights on social exclusion from disaster recovery and resilience resources. HUD typically requires CDBG-DR grantees to follow the conventional CDBG [program requirement](#) that at least 70% of the funds benefit low- and moderate-income persons (42 U.S.C. §5301(c)). In some *Federal Register* notices since 2013, HUD has required CDBG-DR grantees to report on plans to serve and engage vulnerable populations. A [2021 report by the Government Accountability Office](#) described challenges with defining such populations at the federal level, and recommended enhanced data collection and analysis related to access and procurement of assistance among these groups. HUD has published [technical assistance for CDBG-DR grantees](#), focused on equitable engagement of individuals in protected classes, vulnerable populations, and underserved communities.

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