

Streamlining disaster assistance processes

Disaster survivors shouldn't have to tell the government the same thing twice.

In early 2023, the team started the design phase with extended scoping to better understand the identified customer pain points in the intake and referral process (when the customer moves between FEMA and SBA). For example, the team learned from Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) staff that technology and communication barriers make it difficult for survivors to navigate the disaster registration intake process with FEMA and the referral process to other Federal agencies that provide individual assistance. The team worked with FEMA and SBA to gather and analyze customer navigation data. They focused on the referral process from FEMA to SBA and learned that 7 percent of all FEMA registrants ultimately apply for assistance with SBA. Evidence from in-person research suggests that survivors who could benefit from assistance from SBA do not understand that the agency provides assistance to homeowners.

The project team consulted with FEMA on potential improvements to disasterassistance.gov and SBA on enhancements to the MySBA Loan Portal to identify areas for improved coordination. Both agencies are progressing on internal changes that will improve the survivor experience and will further shape this project. The team also discussed the possibilities for data sharing and other developments with agency leaders during recurring Steering Committee meetings.



The team visited Vermont Disaster Recovery Centers to learn about the experiences of disaster survivors and front line staff.

Collaborating agencies:
DHS (FEMA), SBA, HUD,
USDA, HHS

Foundation:
Discovery Research &
Life Experience Charter

“So much of our job is re-wording questions so people can understand them and so we can pull details out of them— there are answers they don't know how to give, we help translate.”

- FRONTLINE STAFF FROM A
DISASTER RECOVERY CENTER

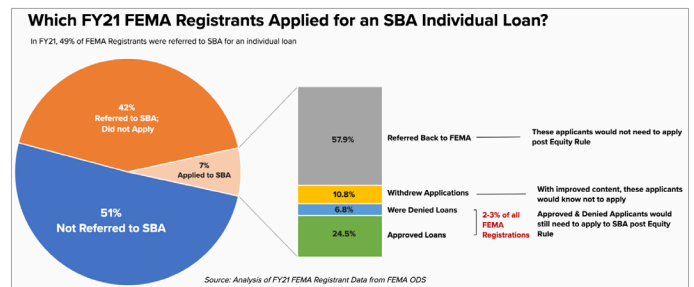





Diagram of an analysis of FY21 FEMA Registrant Data

Calculating a more holistic burden estimate

DESIGN PHASE MILESTONES

Milestone	Status	Notes
Analyzed data for FEMA's IA individual assistance registration and SBA's disaster loan program.		Completed. The project team has gathered data and conducted analyses to meet this milestone and to support the project's broader goals to reduce customer navigation burden, minimize duplication, and improve communication.
Create a roadmap and methods of collaboration between FEMA and SBA, including a cross-team task force and a shared backlog of projects.		In progress and behind schedule. The project team has worked closely with FEMA and SBA since June 2023, and both agencies are progressing on internal initiatives. To improve the customer experience, both agencies must jointly establish a roadmap and methods for working collaboratively. The team aims to revisit technical plan options in 2024.
Improve messaging around FEMA's intake application and SBA's loan program on the web, outbound communications, and call center scripts.		In progress and behind schedule. The project team is using insights from the discovery phase and new research to understand and improve how disaster survivors engage with information through various channels and steps in the process.

DESIGN PHASE PROJECT MEASURES

Design Phase Measure	Assessment Approach & Data	December 2023 Status
Decrease burden of registering for individual assistance by reducing redundant interactions with SBA and FEMA. The team will use the burden calculation method and outputs from the burden estimate project , including a current state understanding of the cumulative burden disaster survivors face in applying for disaster aid from both SBA and FEMA.	Estimate burden calculation and conduct usability testing.	Too early to assess.
Increase in access (e.g., minimize drop-off rates in the registration process), particularly among applicants in underserved communities.	Comparative data analysis between the flow of users through the current registration process and the flow through the proposed updated process.	Too early to assess.
Improve customer experience measures such as the ease of finding and understanding the registration process (particularly via online search engines), completing registrations for assistance, equity, transparency, and public trust.	Usability testing with disaster survivors.	Too early to assess.
Improve survivor understanding of the registration process, particularly during their first interaction with the government, using plain language and simplified content design that meet the policy and system requirements of the registration process.	Usability testing with disaster survivors.	Too early to assess.
Increase access and understanding of federal disaster assistance programs (in addition to FEMA), facilitated by coordinated/seamless referrals from FEMA to those agencies (such as SBA).	Data analysis of the information that survivors correct at each touchpoint with FEMA, informing use of plain language and changes in content design.	Too early to assess.

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Project Summary

This project aims to clarify and simplify the experience of applying for Federal disaster assistance programs. Currently, survivors must navigate and apply for each relief program separately. These processes can be confusing, and survivors are unclear about the different kinds of assistance they may be eligible for and how to apply; once they do, they must keep track of multiple processes and communication channels and often enter the same data multiple times.

Project Objectives

The project will first work on FEMA's Individual Assistance (IA) registration process and SBA's disaster loan application. Improving how survivors begin FEMA's application process and clarifying how FEMA and SBA offer direct assistance programs could reduce the burden of the initial application processes for survivors.

Target milestones in 2023 include:

- Analyze data for FEMA's IA individual assistance registration and SBA's disaster loan program
- Create a roadmap and methods of collaboration between FEMA and SBA, including a cross-team task force and a shared backlog of projects
- Improve messaging around FEMA's intake application and SBA's loan program on the web, outbound communications, and call center scripts

Primary deliverables in 2023 include:

- Updated relevant Computer Matching Agreements, which permit FEMA and SBA to share data (for example, to help ensure that applicants don't receive duplicate benefits from the same disaster)
- New disasterassistance.gov intake application for FEMA IA is available to disaster survivors
- New disaster loan application on mySBA.gov is available to disaster survivors

Measures of Success

Key outcomes:

The project's success is defined by its ability to reduce customer navigation burden, minimize duplication, and effectively communicate steps to access relevant assistance provided by multiple Federal entities, which will enable more survivors to receive the aid they are eligible for and recover more quickly.

Design phase project measures (*subject to change based on discovery findings*):

- Decrease application processing time by reducing redundant interactions with SBA and FEMA, such as repeated data entry. The team will use the burden calculation method and outputs from the burden estimate project, including a current state understanding of the cumulative burden disaster survivors face in applying for disaster aid from both SBA and FEMA
- Increase in access (e.g., minimize drop-off at various points, time delays due to the need for additional documentation or incomplete applications), particularly among applicants from underserved communities
- Improvements in customer experience measures such as the ease of applying for assistance, the efficiency of the application review, equity, transparency, and public trust