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Nadia Seeteram

with support from
Patrick Beckley,
Emily Doyle, and
Swathi Manchikanti

Demystifying Long-Term Disaster Recovery Grant Administration

Technical Assistance Opportunities at the
US Department of Housing and Urban Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program, which assists affected communities with long-term disaster recovery funding. CDBG-DR grant recipients have requested more technical assistance from HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development (CPD) to help accelerate program planning and implementation. CPD should (1) **create a web-based guidebook for grant recipients with the assistance of technology service groups such as the US Digital Service (USDS) or the 18F division of the General Services Administration**, and (2) **host monthly "office hour" webinars** where staff answer questions sent in advance by grantees. These solutions would address 2 main bottlenecks that impede CPD from efficiently delivering technical assistance. They would provide a mechanism to (1) convert existing materials into a single reference point for grantees that can be regularly updated and (2) address immediate concerns from grantees in a time-sensitive manner. These solutions would improve the user experience in accessing relevant information and allow grantees to move faster through CDBG-DR grant administration.

BACKGROUND

A grantee refers to US states, territories, counties, or municipal governments that are grant recipients of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Subgrantees are awarded grants by grantees and are usually county and local governments.

CDBG-DR has become an increasingly important source of funding, with more than [\\$95 billion in disaster recovery funds](#) allocated to over 80 grantees to date and many more subgrantees across the country. CDBG-DR's role in the disaster recovery process has increased substantially over the years as it fills many long-term unmet community needs (such as home retrofitting, relocation from high-risk areas, and small business aid) after other federal funding sources have been exhausted.

Communities often face serious delays in receiving and administering long-term disaster recovery funding once they are approved as CDBG-DR recipients. [Recent reporting](#) and [studies](#) have called attention to the long timeline (an average of 5 years) associated with CDBG-DR funding delivery and program closeout for grantees, and the associated effects in delaying benefits to affected communities. Many factors are responsible for these longer timelines, including [delays in congressional authorization](#) for funding, [changes in CDBG-DR requirements or program rules](#), [staff turnover](#) across all levels of grant administration, and [lack of staffing capacity](#) among grantees.

“[Technical assistance](#) refers to programs, activities, and services provided by federal agencies to strengthen the capacity of grant recipients and to improve their performance of grant functions. . . . Technical assistance includes the improvement of grant outcomes, grant management, grantee compliance, project monitoring and evaluation, and interactions with stakeholders.”

[U.S. Government Accountability Office](#)

Technical assistance is designed to help grantees better navigate these complex processes. According to research and informal interviews, grantees believe that more technical assistance would enable them to move more quickly through grant administration. Grantees specifically request more assistance with building staff capacity and more access to expertise within HUD, including:

1. more resources for HUD staff to visit affected jurisdictions and provide support during planning and implementation;¹
2. standardization of grant implementation procedures, such as determination of duplication of benefits or procedures for requesting environmental review waivers; and
3. publication of a web-based guidebook that is regularly updated.²

All of these requests address opportunities to reduce bottlenecks and streamline planning and implementation of CDBG-DR activities.

Technical assistance resources are currently hosted on HUD Exchange, an online platform that hosts resources for all HUD administered grants. However, the materials are often split across repositories within [HUD Exchange](#) as well as a separate [CDBG-DR toolkit](#).³ Grantees are often unaware of resources such as the [CDBG-DR toolkit](#). Moreover, many materials within this repository are almost 10 years old and therefore less relevant today. Where updated resources do exist, such as the newly released [CDBG-DR Consolidated Notice Guidebook](#), it is not often clear where to find them on HUD Exchange.⁴ Despite the wealth of information in this guidebook, this particular resource is also difficult to read given its 2-column layout.

These problems are compounded by resourcing and structural issues within HUD. CDBG-DR lacks permanent statutory authority, and certain procedures are rewritten with each congressional authorization, thereby reducing the relevance of some of the content over time. Moreover, when grantees reach out for assistance, HUD field office staff are often ill-equipped to provide the same level of technical assistance to grantees as HUD's CPD staff, leading to delays in receiving responses as requests travel up the chain of command.⁵ Given the consequences of delaying funding to communities because of grant administration bottlenecks, CPD must strategically determine how best to provide accessible and relevant technical assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. HUD CPD should develop a web-based CDBG-DR guidebook and request assistance from technology service groups, such as the USDS or 18F, in digitizing content on HUD Exchange. Grantees, especially newer grantees, have requested a web-based digitized guidebook to provide technical assistance that can be adapted over time.⁶ The guidebook should be a single digitized reference for grantees that is regularly updated and used to standardize procedures within CDBG-DR program planning and implementation, where possible. The guidebook should incorporate relevant information already hosted on HUD Exchange, along with updated content that reflects recent procedural changes (see Recommendation 2).

The guidebook is intended to complement ongoing efforts by HUD to digitize CDBG-DR technical assistance information. The recently released [CDBG-DR Consolidated Notice Guidebook](#) and its [interactive component](#) provides an excellent example of how this information could be digitized. Existing material within the [CDBG-DR toolkit](#) should also be considered within the new guidebook, especially where the information is still relevant. However, the new web-based guidebook would provide specialized technical assistance that grantees request. The proposed web-based CDBG-DR guidebook should share relevant materials on HUD Exchange in a comprehensive and easy-to-search manner. In addition, the digitized CDBG-DR guidebook should include new content that provides the technical assistance grantees require. The guidebook should be an evolving resource, with new technical assistance and information added periodically based on the questions and issues raised by grantees during the office hours (see Recommendation 2).

The digitized guidebook should prioritize interactive elements and optimize the grantee experience of accessibility (see Appendix 1.a.i-ii for example website design and implementation details). Prominent examples of digital guidebooks within the federal government that HUD could emulate include the [National Institutes of Health Central Resource for Grants and Funding Information](#) and [Grants.gov](#)'s organization registration guidebook.

The CDBG-DR guidebook could be created with the assistance of technology groups within the federal government, like the [USDS](#) and [18F](#). The USDS provides technological services to federal agencies and public servants to improve the online user experience through a client-based, collaborative approach without cost to the user. Please see Appendix 1.a.i for more details on requesting the assistance of the USDS. If the USDS is unable to support this initiative, other

government services like 18F are available to provide technological support, though at a cost to the agency (see Appendix 1.a.ii for more details).

One barrier to implementation of this recommendation is staff time. CPD staff would need to identify resources across HUD Exchange that are still timely and relevant to current procedural requirements, reorganize content to promote user accessibility (see Appendix 1.b for implementation details), and consult with the USDS or 18F on the guidebook creation. Staff would also be responsible for continually updating online materials as well. This being said, such activities would not require a large time investment, as USDS or another technological service would be responsible for the guidebook design, which would ultimately amount to time saved for grantees as well as HUD CPD staff and field staff.

2. HUD should host monthly “office hour” webinars where staff answer questions sent in advance from grantees, and incorporate this information in the new web-based guidebook. HUD CPD could use a new office hours program to (1) *establish connections and build trust with new and existing grantees*, (2) *clarify procedures on grant administration*, and (3) *begin developing a knowledge base to update content hosted on HUD Exchange*. We also recommend that CPD encourage HUD field staff, especially new hires, to attend the webinars to build capacity within field staff.

The goal of office hours is to provide an additional channel of communication between CPD and grantees. It is intended neither to replace existing lines of communication nor to address concerns about staff accessibility. To the contrary, grantees often expressed positive feedback on the communication with their grant managers and their accessibility.

Participatory approaches to technical assistance already are growing across the federal government as online platforms facilitate more contact with administrators and users. [HUD uses an office hours approach in its COVID-19 Planning and Response efforts](#) and includes [recorded webinars](#). The Environmental Protection Agency is also endorsing [a similar approach to delivering technical assistance](#) for its Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Program. Our recommendation deviates slightly from those programs; we instead propose a mechanism (a form) to sort through grantee questions to prioritize and prepare answers ahead of time. Questions would be requested from grantees in advance ([sample form here](#)) via email from CPD ([sample emails here](#)). Please see Appendix 2.a-c for more implementation details.



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The Aspen Institute
2300 N St. NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20037
202 736 5800



This recommendation is cost neutral and does not require the development of new technology. CPD already hosts many webinars, so this solution can be implemented with existing online resources. The data generated from the question request forms can also be used to identify topics where grantees have many outstanding questions, which could lead to a more targeted and data-driven approach to further training and tool development.

The largest barrier to implementation is staff time. Staff would need to sort and prioritize questions for the webinar (see Appendix 2.b) and develop answers. However, such time investment in the short term would enable HUD to more efficiently support grantees in the long term. By enabling staff to begin standardizing elements of the CDBG-DR process that are not changing across authorizations, this approach would enable HUD staff to more efficiently address multiple grantee questions rather than the current one-at-a-time approach. Finally, given the time investment in the office hours webinars, we recommend using the content from the webinars to develop an updated knowledge base for the web-based guidebook. The content can also be uploaded to HUD Exchange while the guidebook is in development (see Appendix 2.c).

CONCLUSION

We recommend that HUD CPD provide grantees with more technical assistance and standardized procedures. **In particular, we recommend that CPD create a web-based guidebook based on existing content from the CDBG-DR toolkit using government services like the US Digital Service or 18F, that can be regularly maintained and updated. CPD should also convene monthly “office hours” webinars** to address technical assistance concerns directly from grant recipients, and **use this content to update the guidebook.** Both solutions would streamline procedural operations for grantees, allowing them to more efficiently navigate the planning and implementation process, and resulting in time saved for staff as well.

Appendix A

1. DIGITIZED GUIDEBOOK

a. Options for Implementation

i. The US Digital Service:

The USDS, a tiger team within the federal government focused on technology and digital service delivery, is the preferred option for producing the guidebook. The service would come at no cost to the agency. Relevant examples of its work include [simplifying services through VA.gov](#) and [creating SchoolSafety.gov](#). To request the assistance of the USDS, please email usds@omb.eop.gov. The USDS uses a form with a series of questions designed to prioritize requests based on impact and the uniqueness of the request.

ii. 18F

18F is an office of the General Services Administration (GSA) that provides technological solutions through collaboration with other agencies to enhance public services. 18F does not receive congressional appropriations and therefore charges a fee for its services. 18F uses [Interagency Agreements](#) to outline the terms of its projects and bills partners through [Intra-Governmental Payment and Collection](#). To request its services, please visit [this website](#) to learn more or email inquiries18F@gsa.gov.

b. Concept

i. Changes to Organizational Structure

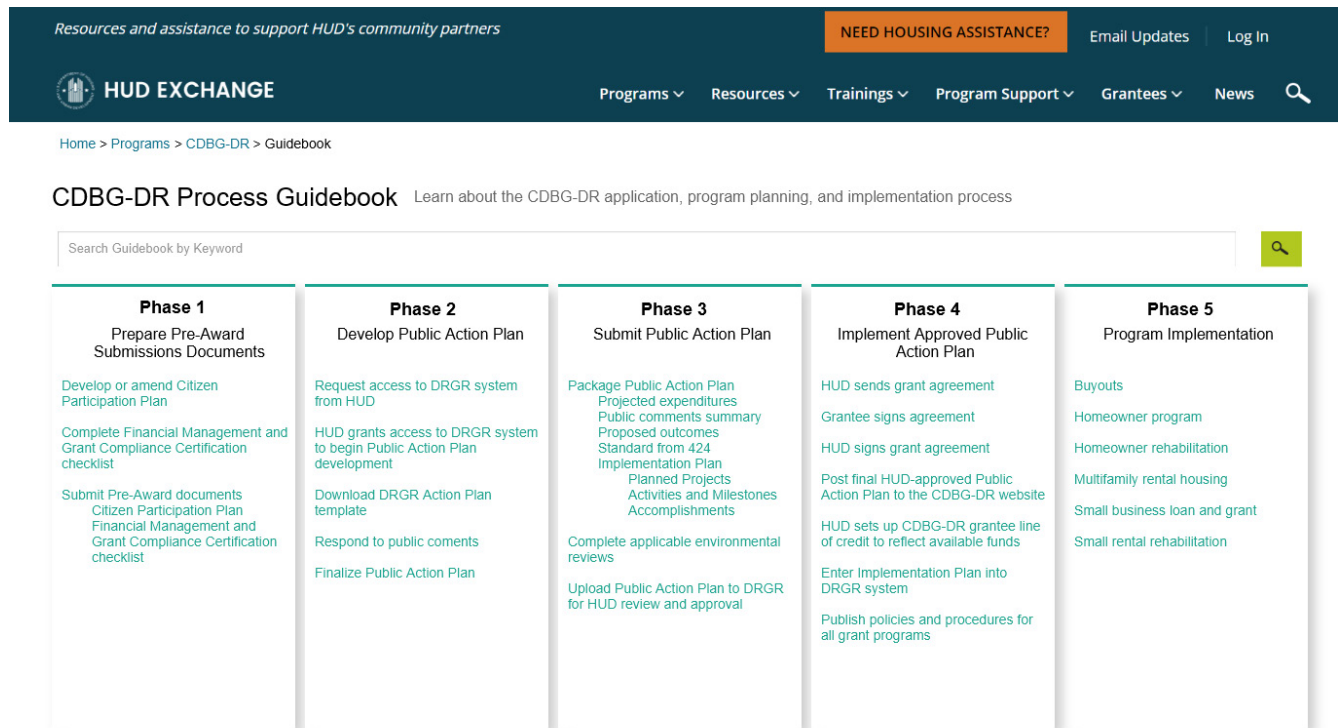
The new web-based guidebook should be organized to optimize grantee accessibility. One option to improve the user experience would be to reorganize existing resources (such as calculators, guidance, and presentations from webinars) and new resources (from the office hours webinars) to follow a phase-by-phase sequential organization that corresponds to the CDBG-DR grant

administration process, as displayed in Figure 1. For example, under Phase 3, all resources (such as fact sheets, webinars, and guidance) that are relevant to “environmental review” that are currently hosted on HUD Exchange could be organized under that subtopic so that grantees would be able to easily find and access all materials.

ii. Content

The web-based guidebook should include the existing materials on HUD Exchange that are still relevant to grant administration procedures. Additionally, the digitized guidebook should be considered an evolving resource to be updated periodically with the new content generated through the office hours webinars.

Figure 1: CDBG-DR Guidebook Example Mockup. The image below displays an example of a CDBG-DR web-based guidebook where resources are organized by sequence within the grant administration process.



Interactive Opportunities

Existing and new tools should be digitized to be more interactive and user-friendly to grantees, where possible and relevant. For example, tools or calculators like the [Staffing Analysis Worksheet](#) should be digitized so that grantees can interact with the tool on the guidebook website rather than downloading the spreadsheet.

2. OFFICE HOURS WEBINAR SERIES

a. Implementation details: Form

i. Before office hours are hosted, grantees should submit questions via a form. The sample form logic (see Figure 2 below) was developed using the layout of the CDBG-DR toolkit, which divides resources into “program planning” and “program implementation.” The subsections were also derived from similar headings within the planning and implementation sections and based on reported sources of procedural bottlenecks by grantees. (Note: the sample form is intended to display functionality only, and not intended to endorse Google Suite products. A similar form could be developed using Microsoft Forms or other HUD-approved procurement services).

b. Implementation details: Criteria for grantee question prioritization

i. After receiving the questions or topic areas of interest from grantees prior to each month’s office hours, CPD staff should prioritize questions and prepare responses, which would be shared live during the webinar. Below, we include a few suggested criteria for CPD to consider when shortlisting the questions.

1. **Newer grantees:** New grantees are less likely to have in-house capacity built to address concerns arising in CDBG-DR program launch and implementation, and may generally require more assistance.
2. **Environmental regulations and waivers:** Navigating environmental review, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), historic preservation guidelines, and waivers presents a significant time delay for grantees, some of whom have expressed that the existing technical assistance on these topic areas was not helpful.⁷ Given the high time commitment

needed to navigate these topics and the lack of clarity, questions that would help standardize procedure in this topic area should be prioritized.

3. **Duplication of benefits:** Conducting duplication of benefits analyses and documentation has been cited as a time-consuming activity for grantees given issues in data sharing across agencies and adhering to requirements.⁸
4. **Information management systems:** According to our interviews with grantees and subgrantees, developing an information management system has also been highlighted as a significant area where grantees need additional guidance.

During each office hours, attendees would be regularly reminded to check previous session recordings and the guidebook for questions that have already been answered. Office hour webinars should be hosted at least once a month to ensure timeliness of the responses, and should last at least an hour. Adjustments for time and frequency should be made according to the volume of interest from grantees.

c. Guidebook Development/Online Hosting

We recommend recording the webinar and transcribing the audio content, which can be easily produced through Microsoft Teams or other online transcription services. If the webinar is hosted through Microsoft Teams, [live transcription can be enabled and downloaded into a document afterward](#). Zoom provides a similar function. If an alternative hosting platform is chosen without built-in transcription services, web-based services like [Temi](#) and [Trint](#) are available.

After each webinar, we recommend posting the webinar, the transcription, and other materials produced for the webinar such as presentations on HUD Exchange so that grantees may access the content while the guidebook is being developed. We also suggest tagging the videos with keywords, similar to those used to search for [HUD training videos](#) on HUD Exchange. Since webinars may not be thematically organized like training videos, keywords will be essential to enabling future searches. Figure 3 displays an example site mockup.

Once the materials are posted on HUD Exchange, we recommend that HUD CPD email all active grantees and subgrantees to notify them of the posting. We suggest this extra step given the seemingly low awareness of existing tools on HUD Exchange, including the CDBG-DR toolkit and other webinars, among grantees.⁹ In addition to serving as a notification of posted materials, this email may also serve as the new monthly solicitation for more office hour questions ([sample email](#) and [flyer included here](#)).

Figure 2: CDBG-DR Office Hours Form Logic. Logic used to create the sample form is detailed below.

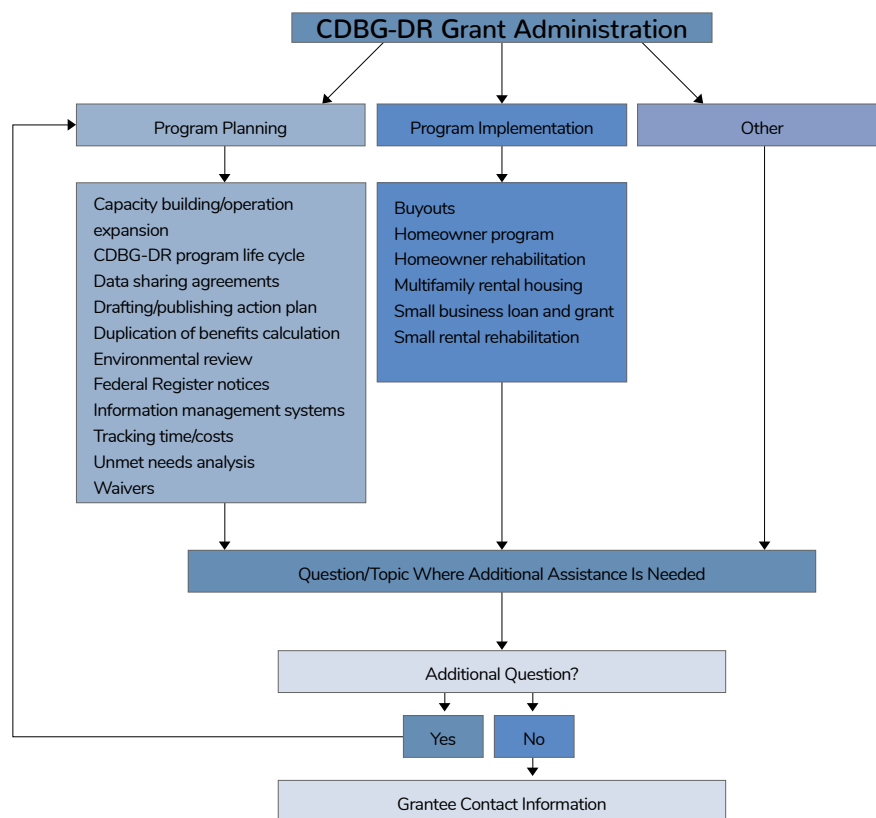
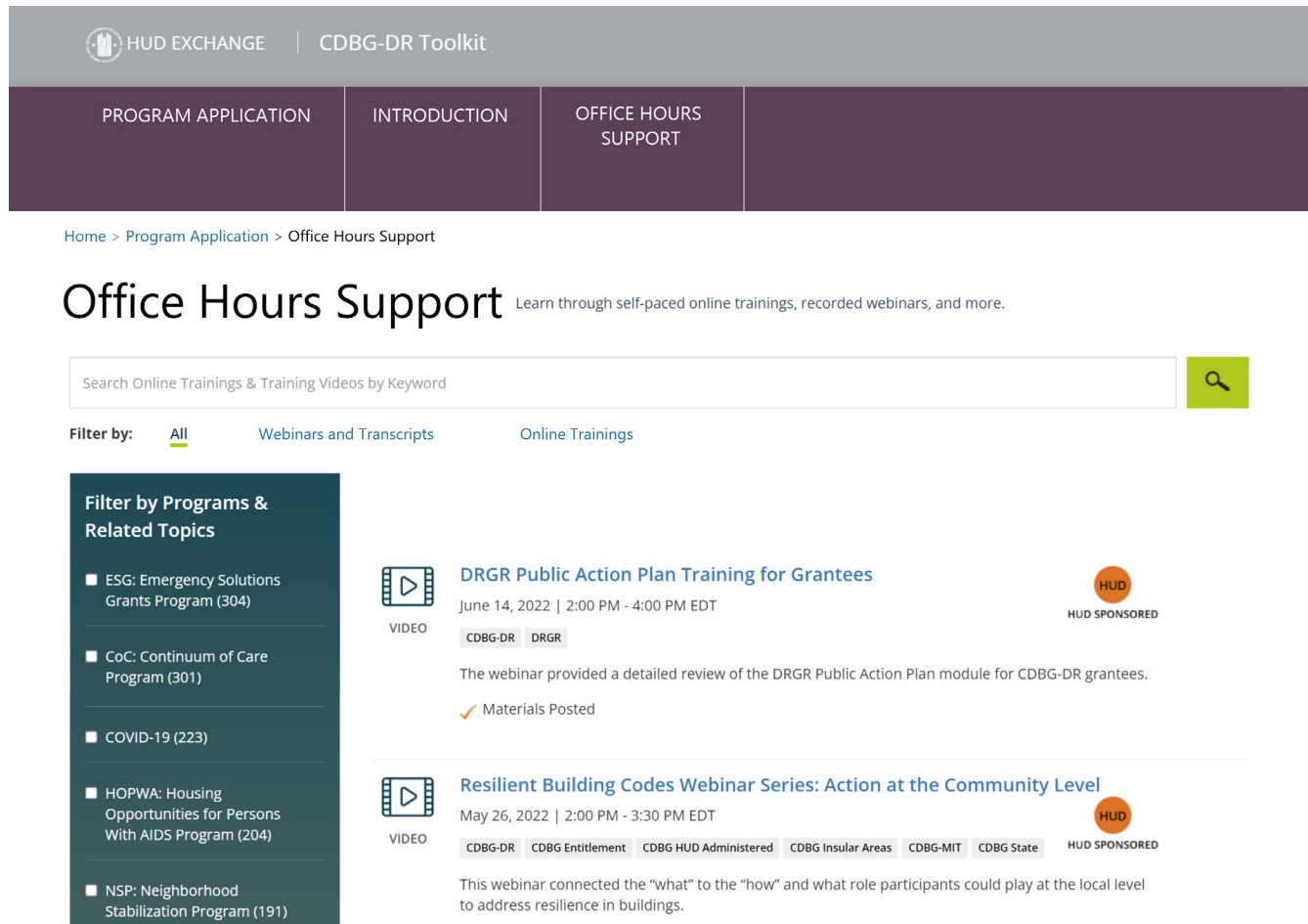


Figure 3. Website Mockup of Office Hour Webinars. The image below details how office hour webinars should be uploaded to HUD Exchange as the guidebook is being developed.



ENDNOTES

1. Carlos Martin et al., *Housing Recovery and CDBG-DR: A Review of the Timing and Factors Associated with Housing Activities in HUD's Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery Program*, Urban Institute, April 2019, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/HousingRecovery-CDBG-DR.html>, 58–61; and informal interviews with HUD grantees and subgrantees.
2. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 58, 61; and informal interviews with HUD grantees and subgrantees.
3. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 60.
4. This resource was located under the “news” bracket within HUD Exchange and also hosted under the “CD-BG-DR Grantees” portal on the HUD website.
5. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 59.
6. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 58; and informal interviews with grantees and subgrantees.
7. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 49; and informal interviews with grantees and subgrantees.
8. Martin, *supra* note 1, at 50.
9. *Id.*



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DISASTER RECOVERY GRANT ADMINISTRATION**

Policy Brief

