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FEMA Cuts CORE Personnel with Potential for Additional Layoffs in Near Future

Jan 12, 2026

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By Oliver Porter, NLIHC DHR Intern and Noah Patton, NLIHC Director of Disaster Recovery

At the end of December, FEMA initiated another round of staffing cuts, letting more than 50 staff members go on December 31, according to [reports](#). FEMA could [layoff](#) an additional 1,000 employees this month, further reducing the agency's operational personnel necessary to respond to disasters. Last week, additional documents obtained by journalists detailed FEMA's workforce reduction plans, revealing [possible termination](#) of more than 4,300 CORE staff members and 6,500 surge-staffing personnel (people who are on standby to assist with immediate disaster response efforts).



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The division, known as the Cadre of On-Call Response and Recovery, employs approximately 40% of FEMA's 23,000-person workforce,



amounting to about 8,000 people. These employees are deployed to disaster-affected areas to assist local officials with response and recovery, sometimes for years. CORE employees usually work through multi-year contracts that are typically frequently renewed. Last month, however, the Department of Homeland Security [revised](#) its policy requiring that renewals to CORE contracts come from the DHS Secretary. This new policy could prevent or delay thousands of staffers' contracts from being renewed in 2026. Beyond creating more bureaucratic hurdles, this [new policy](#) potentially violates the "Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act," which bars DHS from being highly involved in FEMA's management process.

FEMA officials maintain that the leaked plans to cut more than 10,000 staff were only an exercise and are not currently being acted upon, but this development echoes leaked details from the FEMA Review Council's proposed [final report](#) back in December, which allegedly called for cutting agency staff by 50%.

In 2025, FEMA's workforce [shrank](#) significantly because of widespread federal layoffs, going from almost 29,000 employees down to about 23,000. These major staffing reductions were carried out even though a 2023 [report](#) from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) had found that FEMA was operating at only 65% of its staffing target and was short by more than 6,000 employees.

All these FEMA staffing reductions occurred during a hurricane season that was unusually subdued—the 2025 hurricane season marked the first time in [10 years](#) that a hurricane did not make landfall in the US. Reducing response personnel is a particularly risky decision, as there are no guarantees that the 2026 hurricane season will follow a similar pattern given the rising impact of climate change on the intensity and frequency of hurricanes and other hazards. The potential layoffs at FEMA will become clearer once the FEMA Review Council releases its final report, which was [postponed](#) in December with no alternative date provided.



Collectively, these management decisions made by DHS and FEMA leadership drive home the importance of restoring FEMA to independent status. The bipartisan “[FEMA Act](#)” offers a promising avenue for achieving this, while implementing other important [reforms](#) which would make the agency more efficient, effective, and equitable.

The DHR team continues to collect organizations’ signatures in support of the “FEMA Act” and has a sign-on letter that is available [here](#), with a requested deadline of January 30.

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