From: Route Fifty on behalf of Route Fifty <news@e.routefifty.com>
To: Robert Halfacre
Subject: State & Local Roundup: US disaster relief funding runs dry
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Connecting state and local government leaders

Route Fifty's State & Local Roundup
Saturday, September 28, 2024

It's Saturday, September 28, and we'd like to welcome you to the weekly State and Local Roundup. There is plenty to keep tabs on, including:

- Evolving events around the indictment of New York City Mayor Eric Adams;
- California's plan to formally apologize for being complicit in slavery;
- Georgia's election board decision to require ballot hand counts;
- The death of Nebraska's winner-take-all push, and the piano mayor.

But first we start with disasters.

Even before Hurricane Helene pummeled Florida's Gulf Coast and much of the Southeast this week, the federal government's ability to help with long-term disaster recovery efforts was already in trouble. And Congress left town this week without fixing the problem.

Hurricane Helene brought heavy rains to Georgia overnight on Friday. | Megan Varner via Getty Images

Let's get into the details:

In early August, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced that the account that funds most of the relief programs after major disasters was nearly out of money. Because of the shortage, the agency is only making payments for "immediate needs" such as lifesaving and life-sustaining operations, fire management and the salaries of FEMA field staff. But longer-term disaster recovery operations are now on hold. It is the ninth time FEMA has had to conserve cash because of congressional inaction since 2001.

FEMA said it had to pause at least 650 projects because of the current funding freeze. It does not have enough money to cover the costs of rebuilding communities in Maui that were devastated by fire last year, or to help Midwestern states hit by tornadoes in May.

Several state and local government organizations told congressional leaders in September that the shortage was already hampering recovery efforts. Within the first month of FEMA funding only immediate needs, they wrote in a joint letter, "more than $6.1 billion in recovery efforts ground to a halt."

The Council of State Governments, the National Association of Counties, the National Emergency Management Association, and other groups representing state and local officials signed the letter.

"For the second time in two years now, state and local governments and emergency managers have been forced to manage a unique and wholly avoidable disaster," they wrote. "This unpredictability places an undue burden on disaster survivors and complicates already onerous programs."

The state and local groups urged Congress to pass a bill to keep the federal government operating, along with $10 billion in disaster relief. They also asked Congress to make up for the $6.1 billion shortfall that led to FEMA's cash shortage so that the agency wouldn't have to hoard cash again next year.

But Congress chose not to do that. Instead, it extended FEMA's funding through Dec. 20 and gave the agency flexibility on how and when to spend that money. Even with the extra flexibility, the current relief funding is expected to run out in January.

In fact, the $10 billion request in disaster relief was dropped from the funding bill that Congress passed this week at the last minute, writes Andres Picon of *E&E News*. That's half of what the White House originally proposed, but House Republicans included it in an ill-fated attempt to pass a conservative stopgap funding measure last week. Ultimately, the relief was cut under the bipartisan measure approved on Wednesday, in order to remove objections from conservative lawmakers.

"I would have thought that if you were going to do something, disaster funding would've been one of the starting points. I have no idea how they got to that," U.S. Rep. Mark Amodei, a Nevada Republican and chair of the appropriations subcommittee that oversees FEMA, told the publication. "They didn't call me in and ask me for any advice," he added. "Can you believe that?"

Not all the disaster money that's on hold would go through FEMA. The Biden administration has also asked for $3.5 billion to fund the Community Development Block Grant—Disaster Recovery, a flexible program that helps distressed communities mitigate damage from future disasters. The Department of Housing and Urban Development oversees that program, but the money goes to state and local governments.

The White House said in June that the $3.5 billion "would not only help Maui rebuild, but also cover unmet needs resulting from other disasters declared in calendar year 2023."

U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz, a Hawaii Democrat, blasted congressional inaction on disaster relief in the year since the Maui fires killed 102 people.

"In that time, more disasters have devastated communities all over the country," he

said during a Senate floor speech. “So many people on Maui and in Texas and Vermont and New Mexico and California and Iowa and Florida and 20 states total and, unfortunately, rising, they’re waiting for help and the federal government has not come to their aid yet.”

“They’ve lost loved ones. They’ve lost homes. They’ve lost businesses. They’ve lost livelihoods. And all they want is help and a little bit of hope to get their lives back to something close to normal,” he said. “What are we doing in Congress if we can’t even deliver help to our fellow Americans when disaster strikes?”

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Corruption

Eric Adams pleads not guilty to bribery and fraud charges. The mayor pleaded not guilty to charges that he traded political favors for illegal campaign cash and more than $100,000 in lavish travel gifts during his initial appearance in federal court on Friday afternoon. Adams, the first modern New York City mayor charged with criminal offenses, faces five counts of bribery, wire fraud and soliciting illegal contributions from foreign donors dating back to his time as Brooklyn borough president up through his successful 2021 and ongoing 2025 mayoral campaigns. Adams has said he will not resign. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul actually has the power to remove Adams from office, thanks to a little-used state law. But will she? Hochul has tacitly indicated that she would be open to Adams’ resignation, and didn’t close the door on the prospect of removal.

Reparations

California will apologize for slavery as part of reparations push. Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a slate of bills Thursday aimed at beginning the process of reparations

for Black descendants of enslaved people. The headliner bill signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom requires officials to sign and display a plaque in the state Capitol that includes the following: “The State of California apologizes for perpetuating the harms African Americans faced by having imbued racial prejudice through segregation, public and private discrimination, and unequal disbursal of state and federal funding and declares that such actions shall not be repeated.” California joins a half dozen states, including Alabama and Florida, in issuing such a formal apology. The measure was among 14 bills backed by the California Legislative Black Caucus. Those that called for cash payments were not advanced by legislators.

Elections

Georgia’s election board OKs rule to require ballot hand counts. Three election board members—all described as loyalists to former President Donald Trump—adopted a contentious rule late last week requiring the hand counting of ballots cast during the upcoming Nov. 5 election despite warnings from county election directors that it could lead to more delays with reporting results this fall. Georgia’s attorney general also wrote to board members that their planned rule changes exceeded their legal authority. The new rule requires that three poll workers sort ballots into piles of 50 and count every ballot to determine if the hand count accurately aligns with the number of total ballots scanned at each polling location on Election Day. While it requires a count of the number of ballots cast, it does not require a count of which candidate received more votes.

Ballot Initiatives

Court shelves amendment granting Utah lawmakers right to amend voter-approved initiatives. Votes for a constitutional amendment hastily crafted by Republican leaders in the legislature will not be counted this fall after the Utah Supreme Court ruled Wednesday night that lawmakers did not meet the constitutional threshold to send the proposal to voters during the general election. If passed by voters, the amendment would have empowered lawmakers to repeal or amend any voter-approved ballot initiative. In their decision, the justices upheld a lower court ruling that the language that Republican legislative leaders lawmakers put on the ballot was likely to deceive voters and that the legislature failed to comply with a constitutional requirement that the amendment be published in newspapers across the state.

Education

‘Emphasize abstinence’ in sex ed, Florida tells schools, skip lessons on contraception. Florida has told school districts around the state that they may not teach teenagers about contraception, show them pictures depicting human reproductive anatomy or discuss topics such as sexual consent and domestic violence, according to district officials and an advocate for comprehensive sexual health education. As a result, Orange County Public Schools plans to scrap its own high school sex education plans and instead use a state-approved textbook that focuses on abstinence. Broward County Public Schools has indicated it too will comply with state requirements and “emphasize abstinence” in their lessons. Karen Castor Dentel, a member of the Orange County School Board, said the state’s instructions mean students will glean information from their phones and their friends rather than reputable sources.

Housing

Illinois restarts federal rental assistance program with its own money. Illinois' new state-funded, court-based rental assistance program for tenants struggling to pay rent and their landlords opened late last week. The new program follows a federally funded, statewide program that assisted tenants who were facing financial hardship tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and at risk of eviction. The federally funded program helped more than 10,500 landlords and renters in Illinois and stopped accepting applications in May as the funds were nearly exhausted. Illinois allocated $75 million in state funding to continue to provide rental assistance to renters and their landlords for fiscal year 2025, which began July 1.

Electric Vehicles

Thieves hunting for copper are vandalizing American EV chargers. This year through June, nearly 1 in 5 U.S. public charging attempts ended in failure, according to JD Power; roughly 10% of those aborted sessions were due to a damaged or missing cable. Charging executives say much of the damage has a specific, profit-based motive: copper. Vandalizing a public EV plug isn't much more complicated than stealing a bicycle. Almost all charging stations are unmanned, and cutting a cord can be as simple as severing it from the station with a hacksaw. Vandalism is "front and center for us and has been really since the start of the year," says Anthony Lambkin, vice president of operations at Electrify America, which manages about 1,000 charging stations in North America. In 2024 so far, vandals have cut 215 of the company's cords, up from 79 in the year-earlier period.

First Responders

D.C. medics' new tool to save trauma victims? Bags of blood. Medics in Washington, D.C., have administered more than 100 lifesaving on-site blood transfusions since April as part of a pilot program launched this year. The district is one of a handful of jurisdictions nationwide that has trained medics to administer blood before patients reach the hospital, based on protocols developed by military personnel in the battlefield. Medics in this program have administered "whole blood"—type O blood that has not been separated into components—to dozens of people who survived after being on the brink of death, according to EMS officials. But they say efforts to expand the program could be hampered by a lack of donated blood and a long-term financing plan. The city spends upward of $1,200 per patient for this program, and each unit of blood costs about $550.

Education

How a tool built in Washington state is helping schools fight absenteeism. With student absenteeism at record highs, more Washington districts are using a tool developed by researchers at Washington State University to help get kids back on track: a projected 146 of the state's 295 districts, up from 90 in 2019. The 40-question, web-based assessment for middle and high school students is meant to help figure out why individual students are missing classes and what they need to stay in school. The assessment asks kids detailed questions about their relationships with their peers, mental health issues, family environment, school engagement and more. Once a student finishes the assessment, both the student and the school receive a set of scores indicating their risk level for different outcomes.

Passenger Rail

Amtrak announces new service from Chicago to Florida. New, temporary Amtrak

service between Chicago and Miami will soon begin running as the rail agency gears up for major construction along its busy Northeast Corridor. The new Floridian trains will run daily from Chicago to Miami, stopping along the way in Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. Service begins Nov. 10. The service comes as Amtrak plans to rehabilitate an aging tunnel under the East River in New York and needs to limit the number of trains that are fueled, cleaned and serviced in New York City. The train trip between Chicago and Miami takes about two days, online schedules show. Amtrak once operated Floridian trains between Chicago and Miami, but the service ended in 1979 as track conditions deteriorated, driving away passengers.

Photo of the Week

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu showed off her musical chops last Saturday, performing with the Boston Pops at Symphony Hall. Wu is a pianist who has been playing since a very young age. The event was her second performance at the free Concert for the City event. Last year, Wu performed one movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21, and this year she played

George Gershwin's "Rhapsody In Blue" with the Boston Pops.

What They're Saying

"We call a timeout, go over and talk to the refs and say, 'Hey, we know the value of a field goal is 3, but we're going to need it to be 4 here.' It just doesn't seem fair. … It's not the Nebraska way."

—Nebraska State Sen. Mike McDonnell, on his decision not to support a last-minute effort by state Republicans to make Nebraska winner-take-all.

The state legislator, a Democrat turned Republican from Omaha, said on Monday that he would not agree to change Nebraska's 32-year tradition of awarding three of the state's five electoral votes by congressional district to a winner-take-all system based on the statewide popular vote, bucking calls from Nebraska's governor and its congressional delegation. McDonnell was a key vote, and his decision effectively kills the effort ahead of the presidential election. Explaining his stance, McDonnell said he was more troubled by the timing of the proposed change than by the change itself. He said it felt like changing the rules of the game with two minutes left.

ICYMI: The Top 3 Stories from This Week

Hungry for affordable housing, communities turn to land trusts
The old-school approach is garnering renewed interest amid a nationwide housing crisis. The model promises permanently affordable housing.
By Molly Bolan

Suicide rates for young Americans are increasing. Here's what states are doing about it.
A $68 million federal grant program announced last week during Suicide Prevention Month will help support state programs aimed at solving the youth mental health crisis.
By Kaitlyn Levinson

To fight online misinformation, engage with the 'trolls,' city leaders say
City communications strategists say it is crucial to engage, and quickly, before false narratives take hold.
By Chris Teale

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