

Capacity to implement FEMA-HMA grants: A survey of State Hazard Mitigation Officers

Samata Gyawali, North Carolina State University

Olivia Vilá, North Carolina State University

Samiksha Bhattarai, North Carolina State University

Brian Vaughn, North Carolina State University

Claire Henkel, North Carolina State University

Mentor/Faculty: Dr. Gavin Smith, North Carolina State University

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has spent billions of dollars over the last 30 years on hazard mitigation through their Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) grant programs. State Hazard Mitigation Officers (SHMOs) play a critical role in building the capacity of local governments to apply for and implement these grants. Specifically, SHMOs ensure local compliance with HMA rules, develop prioritization strategies for the distribution of HMA funds, develop state or territory hazard mitigation plans, and build the capacity of local governments to apply for and implement HMA grants. Despite this important role, there is limited research that directly assesses the capacity of states and territories to consider and address the diverse needs of local communities while adhering to federal guidelines associated with HMA grant programs. Using a nation-wide survey of SHMOs, this study addresses this gap by focusing on the role of states and territories in building the capacity of local governments to apply for and implement FEMA HMA grants. The survey, which contained both close-ended and open-ended questions, sought to explore (1) engagement in HMA programs, (2) assistance provided to local governments, (3) commitment to hazard mitigation, and (4) perceived local government needs, to include needs in underserved communities. With a 77% response rate, the results indicate important key findings. In particular, results highlight low to modest participation and understanding of supplemental FEMA capacity-building funding programs (Program Administration by States and Advance Assistance), significant variation across states and territories in their ability to provide necessary technical assistance, insufficient state- and territory-level leadership, and poor strategies to identify and reach out to underserved communities. While the results are concerning, they provide clear direction for improving state and territory capacity to help local governments become better equipped to apply for and implement FEMA HMA grant programs.