

A National Disaster Safety Board *Toward a more resilient future.*

More intense and more frequent natural disasters call for **smarter resilience policies**. Smarter policies require a better understanding of why natural disasters cause the harm that they do.

Currently, policymakers rely on a patchwork of studies, after-action reports, audits, and media reports to understand the impacts of natural disasters. Given the complex nature of these incidents and their contexts, these reports are of limited use. The information presented is not standardized—hindering comparison or trend analysis—and when they are written by the same organizations responsible for regulation or incident management, the reports are vulnerable to internal political pressure.¹ As such, **existing reports seldom address the underlying causes** behind the loss of life or major property damage that disasters leave in their wake nor do they offer policymakers a path forward.

A solution lies in an existing public model. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigates plane crashes, major railroad accidents, and commercial highway accidents. The organization is tasked with revealing the course of events that led up to each accident and the underlying causes that may lead to similar accidents in the future. The NTSB is independent, its reports are public, and its reviews and recommendations are considered to be a **gold standard internationally**. Most importantly, the **NTSB has saved lives**; the rate of air travel fatalities has decreased more than 99 percent since 1960.²

A National Disaster Safety Board (NDSB) would apply the best principles of the NTSB to natural disasters. The Board would seek to **understand underlying causes** of disaster fatalities and property damage across the country and make recommendations to all levels of government to inform **smarter resilience policies**. Key elements of the Board would include:

- **The NDSB will be collaborative.**
 - NDSB reviews would use the party system, allowing affected state and local governments to participate.
 - The Board would take detailees from federal, state, and local government agencies and research institutions.
 - At least two of the Board's seven members would come from state and local contexts.
 - Affected government federal, state, and local departments and agencies will have the opportunity to comment on reports and recommendations before publication.

- **The NDSB will be forward-looking.**

¹ Daniel J. Barnett, Kandra Strauss-Riggs, Victoria L. Klimczak, Andrew J. Rosenblum, Thomas D. Kirsch, An Analysis of After-Action Reports From Texas Hurricanes in 2005 and 2017
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32011592>

² In 1960, there were 44.159 fatalities per 100 million air miles traveled; by 2018, there were 0.012. DOT, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. National Transportation Statistics.
https://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/national_transportation_statistics/index.html.

- NDSB reviews would be fact-finding efforts, not efforts to assign blame. Natural disasters are complex and the underlying factors behind the severity of an incident often have nothing to do with the organizations managing it.
 - In addition to primarily looking at how national programs can support state and local resiliency, the Board will offer technical assistance to support jurisdictions implementing its recommendations.
- **The NDSB will be independent.**
 - The NDSB would have no regulatory, operational, or grant-making authority.
 - The Board’s seven members would be chosen for their experience in emergency management, public health, engineering, and social and behavioral sciences.
 - The Board’s methods will be public and subject to independent evaluation by the Government Accountability Office.

A number of independent scholars and journalists have called for a similar concept.

- The National Academies of Science this year [recommended](#) improved learning from past incidents, specifically how we understand and prevent loss of life.
- The [Washington Post](#) wrote about the potential for the Board to save lives in California wildfires.
- Wired [explored](#) the idea after the disastrous 2017 hurricane season.
- [Leaders](#) in public health and disaster medicine [called for a Board](#) in 2018.
- The [National Resource Defense Council](#) called for a Board earlier this year.

Leaders in emergency management and resilience who support this proposal include:

- **Brock Long**, former FEMA Administrator (2017-2019)
- **Craig Fugate**, former FEMA Administrator (2009-2017)
- **Ellen Gordon**, former Administrator, Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management, former President, National Emergency Management Association
- **Thomas P. Bostick**, Lieutenant General (retired), United States Army, former Commanding General, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- **Madhu Beriwal**, CEO, President, and Founder of IEM
- **Bryan Koon**, former Director of Florida Division of Emergency Management
- **Alice Hill**, former Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Resilience Policy, National Security Council
- **Russel Honoré**, Lieutenant General (retired), United States Army, former commander, Joint Task Force Katrina
- **Chauncia Willis**, CEO, Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management
- **Daniel Kaniewski**, former FEMA Deputy Administrator (2017-2020)
- **Elizabeth Zimmerman**, former FEMA Associate Administrator (2009-2017)
- **Jeff Byard**, former FEMA Associate Administrator (2017-2020)

- **Roy Wright**, President and Chief Executive, Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, and former Chief Executive, National Flood Insurance Program
- **Marion Mollegen McFadden**, former Deputy Assistant Secretary, Housing and Urban Development (2014-2016)
- **Carlos Castillo**, former FEMA Associate Administrator (2018-2020)
- **Richard Serino**, former FEMA Deputy Administrator (2009-2014)
- **Mark Keim**, MD, former Associate Director for Science, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- **William Carwile**, former FEMA Associate Administrator (2009-2013)
- **Scott Deitchman**, former Associate Director for Environmental Health Emergencies, National Center for Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2003-2015)

Supporting organizations include: Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, American Society of Civil Engineers, Enterprise Community Partners, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, and the Association of State Floodplain Managers.

Organizations that have reviewed or provided technical assistance: FEMA, NIST, GAO, National Hazards Center, RAND, ALNAP, Urban Institute.