

Statement by Senator Daniel K. Akaka, FEMA's project impact II

Senator Daniel K. Akaka Papers

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STATEMENT by DANIEL K. AKAKA
FEMA'S PROJECT IMPACT II
March 8, 2001

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I would like to again address the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Project Impact program. The President's fiscal year 2002 budget proposal stated that the Project Impact disaster preparedness campaign, "has not proven effective." I am looking into the issue of effectiveness.

A White House spokesperson, recently citing a FEMA Inspector General report, said that 64 percent of the money awarded by Project Impact had not been spent by communities two years after receiving it. This statement is a bit misleading. True, nearly two years after they were designated as Project Impact partners, seven pilot communities had not spent 64 percent of their grant funds. But the report also goes into detail as to why this was the situation. In many cases, while FEMA funds came quickly, communities needed additional time to mobilize and begin their mitigation programs. These communities were not fully prepared, administratively or programmatically, to accept the grants. Some communities had identified and scheduled multiple mitigation projects, only to realize later that they did not have the staff or resources to carry out more than one project at a time.

While FEMA agreed that communities should spend their grants in a more timely manner, FEMA was concerned about taking steps that would undermine the planning process at local levels by placing more focus on expenditures, or infringe upon local budget cycles and negate community efforts to obtain additional funding. In response to these concerns, FEMA now requires communities to align Project Impact funding with local projects initiated within 18 months of funding. The Inspector General concurred with FEMA's action.

To deal with management issues, the Inspector General recommended that FEMA provide technical assistance to new communities on federal grant management. In response, FEMA has expanded opportunities for technical assistance through availability of regional staff, the Project Impact "How-To-Get-Started" course, and FEMA's website. The Inspector General also recommended improved accounting and reporting by the communities and FEMA to keep records current and accessible. FEMA agreed, implemented new procedures, and the Inspector General was satisfied with their response. Here is a successful example of the federal government returning money and power to local governments.

The IG report recognizes the significant amount of effort already performed by communities and the active involvement with communities that FEMA spends before mitigation projects are accepted and approved. It also recognizes that attitudinal and behavioral changes are occurring in communities through collaboration and increasing public awareness and education about

disaster mitigation efforts. It states that while the benefits derived from such efforts can not be quantified, they are very important to a community that hopes to sustain disaster preparedness measures, long after the initial seed money is gone.

Perhaps these very important, but inherently unquantifiable activities are what the President's spokesman is referring to when he suggests programs such as "scout camps, training Boy Scouts in Delaware, sponsoring a safety fair and those kinds of things" were not worthwhile and demonstrated that the program was ineffective?

Which scout activities should not have been sponsored? The community service project in Pascagoula, Mississippi in which local Boy Scouts were instrumental in developing a database of all commercial and residential structures in the 100-year floodplain? Or the Boy Scouts in Eden, New York who helped clean up debris in creeks that are prone to flooding as part of the community flood mitigation plan? Or the Ouachita Parish, Louisiana Girl Scouts who sponsored a disaster safety fair. Perhaps the Boy Scouts in Culebra, Puerto Rico, who performed an intensive door-to-door mitigation-oriented public awareness campaign, did not deserve training?

The last recommendation in the report was for FEMA to realign resources to better manage the growing number of Project Impact communities. FEMA responded by creating a new position in each region to augment Project Impact staffing needs to deal with the growing number of Project Impact communities and business partners due to the program's popularity and success.

Project Impact is not perfect. Certainly there are areas that could be improved and ways in which it could be made more efficient. FEMA's Inspector General identified several such areas. Through communication and cooperation, FEMA is addressing these issues. In no part of the report does the Inspector General suggest that the program be canceled. On the contrary, many of its recommendations are to help FEMA deal with how the program is growing so that it can continue its successes and improve upon its accomplishments.

The 50th State is vulnerable to a host of natural disasters, and Hawaii's state and local officials know that disaster mitigation is the best way to lessen the impact of catastrophic damage and loss of life. I was interested that when asked about the proposed elimination of Project Impact, the Honorable Harry Kim, mayor of the County of Hawaii and formerly the county's director of civil defense for 24 years, said, "If it were not for mitigation efforts, we would never stay ahead of the game. I hope those in authority will talk to local officials because I would be surprised if anyone would support eliminating Project Impact. The growing pains of any project should not be the cause of cancellation." I agree with Mayor Kim. I urge the President to take another look at Project Impact, which is the only federal program that requires heavy community involvement to meet FEMA's goal of reducing the loss of life and property by protecting the nation from all types of hazards.

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