

Disaster recovery is often constrained not only by the disaster itself but also by the systems responsible for delivering recovery support. During the recovery process, communities are left navigating funding delays, complex administrative processes to access assistance, housing shortages, damaged infrastructure, loss of employment, and insurance claims. Simultaneously, recent reform of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which increases the damage thresholds used to determine Public Assistance (PA) for major disaster declarations, may reduce the number of presidential disaster declarations for non-catastrophic disasters and shift greater responsibility onto states (Congressional Research Services 2025; Labowitz 2025). Consequently, these proposed policy shifts may affect not only state agencies but also frontline service corpsmembers that rely on these funding programs to implement disaster response and environmental restoration efforts. Using focus group and survey data, this report examines the barriers to disaster recovery support observed by corpsmembers across Washington, California, and Texas. Literature shows that effective disaster management is underpinned by the financial, institutional, and operational capacity of states, leading to state-by-state differences in effectiveness. Consistent with the literature, the findings of this report across the states of Washington, California, and Texas show state-level differences in barriers to disaster recovery support.

Data and Methods

The research draws on primary data collected during site visits to three corps organizations whose programs involve environmental restoration as well as disaster response and recovery. The corps that participated in the research included EarthCorps (Washington), Los Angeles Conservation Corps (California), and American YouthWorks (Texas). A mixed-methods approach that combined surveys and a focus group discussion was used to examine corpsmembers' observed barriers to disaster recovery support. The participants were asked to respond to the question: *"In your experience with disaster response and environmental restoration, which of the following barriers have you observed that make it harder for communities to receive the recovery support they need?"* Participants were provided a list of potential barriers and were allowed to choose multiple responses. The results of the survey were examined to calculate the frequency of the barriers identified. Responses from focus group discussions were interpreted alongside survey results to provide additional context on the barriers to disaster recovery support observed by corps members.

Results

Survey results show that service corpsmembers perceive delays in government funding or assistance as the most prominent barrier to disaster recovery support across all three states. The highest proportion of corpsmembers observing funding delays was in Washington (64%), followed by Texas (59%), and a relatively smaller proportion in California (38%). Rouhanizadeh et al. (2020) found several barriers that slow the recovery process, such as delayed allocation of recovery funds, uneven access to financial assistance,

insufficient government funding, unemployment, and inadequate insurance coverage. Staff members of the service corps organizations we visited also expressed that delays in funding have undermined operational capacity by creating uncertainty around staffing and long-term sustainability of the program. As a result, some programs have sought to diversify their funding models, such as fee-for-service agreements to reduce their reliance on federal grant programs. Vilá et al. (2022) examined how the implementation of FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) affected equitable access to funding and found shortcomings in their ability to identify priorities and needs of underserved communities, limitations in outreach and local engagement, and limited jurisdictional capacity to apply for and implement HMA grants. States with limited financial and administrative capacity may struggle to reach affected communities and assume additional responsibilities during disaster response and recovery. These capacity constraints can delay assistance, reduce the ability to coordinate, and hinder outreach to underserved and rural communities (Ferreira et al. 2024; Rouhanizadeh et al. 2020; Vilá et al. 2022).

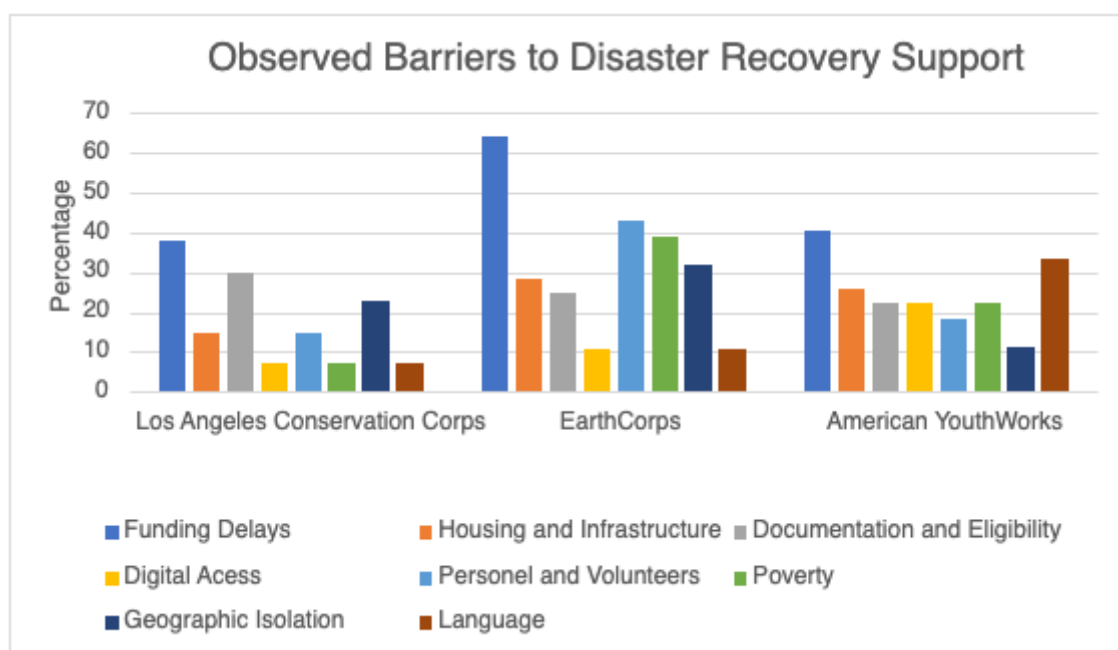


Figure 1. Observed Barriers to Disaster Recovery Support by Corps Members

Infrastructure and housing also play an important role in the recovery process. Rouhanizadeh et al. (2020) identified that damage to roads, housing, and utilities and communication systems disrupts and delays the delivery of disaster aid. These barriers prolong the displacement of affected communities and reduce community resilience by limiting access to essential services, businesses, and employment. A higher proportion of respondents from Washington identified housing and damaged infrastructure as a barrier (29%) compared to respondents from Texas (26%) and California (15%).

There were also variations in the frequency with which respondents identified documentation and eligibility requirements as a barrier across all three states: 30% of respondents from California identified documentation and eligibility requirements as a barrier while only 25% of respondents from Washington and 22% of respondents from Texas did so.

Ferreira et al. (2024) criticize the design of disaster relief programs by arguing that the process of submissions and appeals is too complex, excludes renters over homeowners, and has unclear guidelines that lead to delays in the distribution of aid, postponing the recovery process for months or even years at a time.

Another notable variation across the states was the response rate for personnel and volunteer shortages. For instance, 43% of respondents from Washington identified personnel and volunteer shortages as a barrier. Meanwhile, only 15% of respondents from California and 19% of respondents from Texas identified it as a barrier. Similarly, geographic isolation or distance from services were more frequently identified by respondents from Washington (32%), followed by respondents from California (23%) and Texas (11%). Poverty and lack of financial resources was identified as a barrier in Washington (39%) at a higher rate compared to Texas (22%), and California (7%). However, poverty and lack of financial resources is still an important barrier that undermines equitable disaster recovery processes. Communities with high poverty rates and lack of financial resources frequently experience lower insurance coverage, and less capacity to absorb disaster-related losses due to limited financial resources. Poverty also undermines the household's ability to meet documentation requirements, travel to disaster centers, and financially sustain themselves during application processes (Emrich et al. 2022). Socioeconomic vulnerability, limited institutional capacity, and administrative complexity mutually reinforce each other and create barriers that delay recovery support in underserved communities.

Language and communication barriers were more frequently identified by respondents from Texas (33%) than in California (7%) and Washington (10%). Limited English proficiency perpetuates vulnerability by restricting access to important disaster recovery processes, such as application instructions and communication with personnel (Ferreira et al. 2024). Bilingual service corps members stated in focus groups that they often take on translation roles to aid in communication during their work in disaster response. Internet or digital access was identified as a barrier by 22% of respondents from Texas, but was less frequently identified as a barrier in California (7%) and Washington (10%).

Conclusion

The report examined the barriers to disaster recovery support observed by service corps members across three organizations in the states of Washington, California, and Texas. A state-level comparison of observed barriers to disaster recovery support was done to provide insight into state-by-state differences in equitable disaster recovery support for affected communities. The results show that delays in funding, housing and infrastructure damage, documentation and eligibility requirements, personnel and volunteer shortages, and poverty or lack of financial resources are the prominent barriers to equitable disaster recovery support. Although these barriers were identified by respondents across all three states, their relative prominence varied depending on the state, affirming existing literature on disaster response.

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