

DECEMBER 4, 2024

FINAL REPORT: CHEROKEE NATION TASK FORCE ON DISASTER RESPONSE

STRENGTHENING PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE, AND RECOVERY EFFORTS

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Table of Contents

- Executive Summary 4**
 - Key Recommendations: 4
- Introduction 5**
 - Purpose of the Task Force 5
- Scope of Review 6**
- Methodology 6**
- Findings 7**
 - Overview of Disaster Response Framework 7
 - Key Findings 7
 - Data and Insights 8
 - Implications of Findings 8
- Recommendations 9**
 - 1. Establish Clear Authority and Accountability 9
 - 2. Define Timelines for Disaster Declaration and Tiered Response 9
 - 3. Develop a Tiered Response Framework 9
 - 4. Enhance the Disaster Portal 10
 - 5. Create a Perpetual Disaster Fund 10
 - 6. Implement a Council Inquiry Protocol 11
 - 7. Strengthen Federal and Local Partnerships 11
 - 8. Conduct Annual Training and Simulations 11
 - 9. Leverage Data-Driven Decision-Making 11
 - 10. Quarterly Updates to Council of the Cherokee Nation 12
- Implementation Plan 12**
 - Phase 1: Establishing Authority, Timelines, and Infrastructure (0-6 Months) 12
 - Phase 2: Framework Expansion and Resource Allocation (6-12 Months) 13
 - Phase 3: Training, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement (12-18 Months) 18
- Conclusion 20**
- Citations 21**
 - Primary Sources 21
 - Task Force Materials 21
 - External Guidelines and Best Practices 21
 - Internal Feedback and Stakeholder Contributions 21

Executive Summary

The Cherokee Nation Task Force on Disaster Response, established under Executive Order 2024-06-CTH, conducted a thorough evaluation of the Nation's disaster response capabilities. This report presents findings and strategic recommendations aimed at improving disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. The Task Force identified key areas for improvement, including authority and accountability, financial readiness, data utilization, and interdepartmental coordination. These recommendations are critical to ensuring the safety, well-being, and resilience of Cherokee citizens in the face of natural disasters.

Key Recommendations:

- **Clear Authority and Accountability:** Designate the Senior Director of Public Safety as the Emergency Czar post-disaster, responsible for implementing the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) with the authority to direct resources as needed.
- **Timelines for Disaster Declaration:** Require the Senior Director of Public Safety to recommend a disaster declaration and tiered response within 12 hours of identifying a significant event, triggering a 24-hour window for the Principal Chief to issue the formal declaration.
- **Tiered Response Framework:** Develop a scalable, three-tier disaster response system to match the severity of events, ensuring effective allocation of resources and personnel.
- **Perpetual Disaster Fund:** Establish and grow a disaster fund to \$5 million over three years, starting with a \$1 million infusion in FY 24/25, to ensure financial readiness for future disasters.
- **Enhanced Disaster Portal:** Improve the portal's functionality to allow real-time updates, application tracking, and multi-channel access for citizens.
- **Council Inquiry Protocol:** Assign Emergency Management liaisons to coordinate responses to Council inquiries, with regular briefings to Executive Administration.
- **Leverage Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Conduct annual reviews led by the Senior Director of Public Safety to evaluate disaster responses, refine protocols, and integrate lessons learned.
- **Quarterly Emergency Management Updates:** Require the Senior Director of Public Safety or the Marshal to deliver quarterly updates to the Council of the Cherokee Nation on past and current events, costs, fund status, training progress, and councilor protocols.
- **Annual Training and Simulations:** Implement mandatory annual disaster response training and simulations for key personnel, the Council of the Cherokee Nation, and stakeholders.
- **Strengthen Federal and Local Partnerships:** Enhance collaboration with FEMA, Red Cross, and local entities to secure funding, resources, and expertise for disaster response.

These measures provide a strategic foundation for enhancing disaster readiness and response while fostering trust and accountability within the Cherokee Nation. Together, they aim to safeguard the community and its future.

Introduction

Purpose of the Task Force

The Cherokee Nation Task Force on Disaster Response was formed to ensure that the Nation is well-prepared to respond effectively to natural disasters, minimizing harm to citizens and damage to tribal infrastructure. The task force was charged with evaluating the existing framework, identifying gaps, and recommending actionable improvements to strengthen the Nation's disaster response and recovery capabilities.

The Task Force consisted of eight total members, six selected by the Principal Chief Hoskin and, by invitation, two members of the Council of the Cherokee Nation as indicated below:

1. Member 1: Corey Bunch, Chief of Staff (Chair)
 2. Member 2: Shella Bowlin, Secretary of State (Co-Chair)
 3. Member 3: Todd Enlow, Executive Director Housing Programs and Senior Advisor to the Principal Chief
 4. Member 4: Taralee Montgomery, Senior Policy Advisor
 5. Member 5: Vacant Position, Senior Director of Public Safety
 6. Member 6: Jennifer Kirby, Executive Director of Human Services
 7. Member 7 (invited): Mike Shambaugh, Speaker of the Council of the Cherokee Nation (or Speaker's designated member of the Council)
 8. Member 8 (invited): Kevin Easley, Deputy Speaker of the Council of the Cherokee Nation (designated by Speaker Shambaugh)
 9. Member 9 (invited): Danny Callison, Member of the Council of the Cherokee Nation (designated by Speaker Shambaugh)
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Scope of Review

The Task Force's scope included an analysis of:

- Existing Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)
- Federal and tribal disaster funding mechanisms
- Interdepartmental communication and coordination protocols
- Existing gaps in disaster response, including delays in declarations, resource allocation, and inter-agency collaboration
- Recommendations from FEMA guidelines and national best practices

Methodology

The Task Force conducted its review through a combination of:

- Stakeholder interviews with Emergency Management personnel, Council members, and other key departments
- Analysis of relevant documents, including FEMA guidelines, Cherokee Nation's EOP, and historical disaster data
- Public feedback from affected citizens on previous disaster responses
- Benchmarks against tribal and national best practices in disaster management

This report outlines the findings of the Task Force and presents prioritized recommendations to address identified gaps and improve the Nation's disaster response framework.

Findings

Overview of Disaster Response Framework

The Cherokee Nation's current disaster response framework is built on a solid foundation of interdepartmental coordination, emergency management protocols, and resource allocation. However, the review identified critical areas requiring immediate attention to optimize response times, enhance accountability, and improve outcomes for affected citizens.

Key Findings

1. Authority and Accountability Gaps

- Lack of a centralized authority post-disaster leads to inefficiencies in decision-making and resource allocation.
- Departments often face overlapping responsibilities, creating delays in response times and miscommunication.

2. Delays in Disaster Declaration and Response

- The absence of a structured timeline for recommending and issuing disaster declarations creates delays in mobilizing resources.
- Coordination between Emergency Management and Executive Administration during disaster declarations is underdeveloped.

3. Inconsistent Tiered Response

- Current response strategies are not sufficiently scalable to address varying levels of disaster severity.
- Lack of clear guidelines for activating tiered responses leads to resource mismanagement during major events.

4. Disaster Portal Limitations

- The new disaster portal currently in development, while not complete, lacks user-friendly features for all citizens. There is also no formal communication plan for rolling this out to the public.
- Limited accessibility for citizens without internet or technology literacy hinders equitable disaster assistance.

5. Insufficient Financial Reserves

- The lack of a perpetual disaster fund forces reliance on federal reimbursements, delaying critical aid to citizens.
 - Current funding mechanisms do not provide flexibility to address immediate needs during non-declared disasters.
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6. Council Inquiry Management

- Members of the Council of the Cherokee Nation often act as intermediaries for citizens, leading to uncoordinated inquiries and slower resolution times.
- No established protocol exists for routing Council inquiries through Emergency Management, creating inefficiencies.

7. Limited Federal and Local Collaboration

- Existing relationships with FEMA, the Red Cross, and other agencies require formalization to streamline support during disasters.
- Insufficient clarity around federal reimbursement processes leads to delays in financial recovery.

8. Training and Preparedness

- Annual training and readiness exercises are inconsistently conducted across departments.
- Lack of regular practice scenarios or simulations reduces interdepartmental familiarity with disaster protocols.

Data and Insights

- **Resource Allocation:** Reports indicate resource shortages during major events, including equipment and personnel, emphasizing the need for scalable response tiers.
- **Citizen Feedback:** Public feedback highlighted delays in receiving aid and lack of clarity on eligibility for assistance programs.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Benchmarks with other tribal nations revealed best practices in disaster funding and centralized authority that could be adopted.

Implications of Findings

The findings highlight an urgent need to overhaul the Cherokee Nation's disaster response framework. A lack of centralized authority, delays in declarations, and inconsistent response tiers exacerbate the challenges faced during disasters. Additionally, limited access to financial reserves and inefficient communication protocols hinders timely assistance to citizens. Addressing these gaps is essential to building a resilient, efficient, and community-centered disaster management system.

Recommendations

1. Establish Clear Authority and Accountability

- **Recommendation:** Designate the Senior Director of Public Safety as the Emergency Czar post-disaster, with full authority to implement the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) and oversee disaster response efforts.
- **Details:**
 - Empower the Senior Director of Public Safety and Emergency Management (EM) team to redirect resources and make operational decisions during declared disasters.
 - Daily updates be submitted to Executive Administration to maintain transparency, as determined by the CoS and SoS.
 - Ensure all departments understand the centralized authority of the Emergency Czar during disaster scenarios.

2. Define Timelines for Disaster Declaration and Tiered Response

- **Recommendation:** Implement structured timelines for disaster declarations and tiered responses.
- The Senior Director of Public Safety will make the recommendation for disaster declaration and the appropriate tiered response within 12 hours of identifying a significant event.
- The Principal Chief and designees in the Executive Administration must issue the disaster declaration within 24 hours of receiving the recommendation.
- This structured timeline will ensure prompt mobilization of resources and activation of the appropriate tiered response. Ensure the tier of response (minor, moderate, major) is clearly identified during the declaration process.

3. Develop a Tiered Response Framework

- **Recommendation:** Adopt a scalable, three-tier disaster response system.
 - **Details:**
 - **Tier 1:** Minor events with localized impact requiring limited resources (e.g., EMS and debris removal teams).
 - **Tier 2:** Moderate events needing additional departmental support, including Human Services and Natural Resources.
 - **Tier 3:** Major disasters requiring full-scale recovery efforts, such as coordinated volunteer activities and comprehensive aid distribution.
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- Align funding and resource allocation with the severity tier to prevent resource mismanagement.

4. Enhance the Disaster Portal

- **Recommendation:** Upgrade the disaster portal to improve user experience and expand accessibility.
- **Details:**
 - Incorporate features for real-time tracking of application statuses and integration with field assessment data.
 - Provide multi-channel access, including phone support and in-person application options, for citizens with limited internet access.

5. Create a Perpetual Disaster Fund

To enhance the Nation's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to natural disasters, the Task Force recommends the establishment of a Perpetual Disaster Fund with a target capacity of \$5 million annually. This fund will be dedicated solely to disaster response efforts and will be released only upon appropriate declaration by the Principal Chief made pursuant to objective criteria or staff level recommendations, consistent with this report. Key details include:

- **Initial Funding:** Allocate \$1 million to the fund for FY 24/25 through pro-rated budget modification.
 - **Ramp-Up Plan:** Gradually increase contributions to the fund over the next three years, with \$1.167 million allocated in FY 25/26, \$1.333 million allocated in FY 26/27, and \$1.5 million in FY 27/28 annually until the fund reaches its fully funded target of \$5 million.
 - **Flexibility for Immediate Needs:** While the fund builds toward full capacity, it may be drawn upon incrementally to address disaster events, though its status should be considered underfunded until the \$5 million target is achieved. Therefore, additional funding will be required in each subsequent year until the fund target is achieved. Fund maintenance contributions will need to be considered each subsequent year.
 - Example: \$1 million is deposited into the fund for FY 24/25 but during the year, \$350k is utilized on disaster events. The planned \$1.167 million FY 25/26 contribution would therefore need to be increased by \$350k to stay on track to hit \$5 million in FY 27/28.
 - Starting Balance of the Perpetual Disaster Fund:
 - FY 24/25: \$1 million
 - FY 25/26: \$2.167 million
 - FY 26/27: \$3.5 million
 - FY 27/28: \$5 million
 - **Usage Restrictions:** The fund will only be accessed upon the Chief's appropriate declaration, ensuring it is reserved exclusively for disaster-related expenses.
 - **Long-Term Strategy:** The fund is designed to provide scalable financial resources to support the Tiered Disaster Response Framework, with allocations proportionate to the severity of the disaster.
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6. Implement a Council Inquiry Protocol

- **Recommendation:** Assign a dedicated Emergency Management team member to coordinate Council inquiries.
- **Details:**
 - Establish a direct line of communication between EM and an Executive Administration-appointed Council representative.
 - Regularly brief the Chief of Staff and Secretary of State on all council inquiries and actions taken.

7. Strengthen Federal and Local Partnerships

- **Recommendation:** Formalize agreements with FEMA, Red Cross, and other agencies to ensure streamlined collaboration during disasters.
- **Details:**
 - Provide training for relevant departments on federal reimbursement processes to expedite financial recovery.
 - Conduct joint exercises with federal and local partners to enhance coordination.

8. Conduct Annual Training and Simulations

- **Recommendation:** Schedule annual training and disaster simulation exercises for all relevant departments and officials.
- **Details:**
 - Include Council members, cabinet officials, and field personnel in readiness drills.
 - Conduct interdepartmental workshops to familiarize teams with updated disaster protocols.

9. Leverage Data-Driven Decision-Making

- **Recommendation:** Establish a robust data collection and analysis system to inform disaster response strategies. This includes completing annual reviews, with the Senior Director of Public Safety taking the lead, assessing past responses and update plans as necessary.
 - **Details:**
 - Use GIS mapping and dashboard analytics to prioritize resource deployment and identify areas of greatest need.
 - Overlay storm tracking data with application submissions to target high-impact areas.
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- Use real-time data to adjust response efforts dynamically and track progress.

10. Quarterly Updates to Council of the Cherokee Nation

- **Recommendation:** Require the Marshal or Senior Director of Public Safety to deliver quarterly updates to the Council. These updates should include past and current events, associated costs, the status of the perpetual disaster fund, progress on annual training and simulations, and reminders of protocols, procedures, and resources available for Councilors during disasters.

Implementation Plan

The recommendations outlined in this report require a structured and phased approach to ensure smooth adoption and effective integration into Cherokee Nation's disaster response framework. The following implementation plan identifies key actions, responsible parties, timelines, and anticipated milestones to achieve each recommendation.

Phase 1: Establishing Authority, Timelines, and Infrastructure (0-6 Months)

Objectives:

1. Formalize the designation of the Senior Director of Public Safety as the Emergency Czar post-disaster.
2. Define and approve disaster declaration timelines.
3. Begin enhancements to the disaster portal.

Key Actions:

- **Authority and Accountability:**
 - Draft and approve a formal resolution establishing the authority of the Emergency Czar.
 - Communicate this change to all Cherokee Nation departments through town halls and memos.
 - **Timelines for Disaster Declaration:**
 - Develop a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) detailing steps and deadlines for disaster declarations.
 - Conduct interdepartmental meetings to finalize and approve the SOP.
 - **Disaster Portal Enhancements:**
 - Assign a technical team to begin upgrades focused on improving user experience, real-time updates, and accessibility.
 - Test portal functionality in beta mode with small focus groups.
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Responsible Parties:

- Senior Director of Public Safety
- Emergency Management Team
- Executive Administration
- Information Technology Department

Milestones:

- Resolution passed formalizing Emergency Czar authority.
- Disaster declaration timeline SOP finalized and distributed.
- Beta version of the enhanced disaster portal completed.

Phase 2: Framework Expansion and Resource Allocation (6-12 Months)

Objectives:

1. Implement the tiered disaster response framework.
2. Create the perpetual disaster fund.
3. Strengthen federal and local partnerships.

Key Actions:

- **Tiered Response Framework:**
 - Develop detailed protocols for each tier, including roles, responsibilities, and resource allocation.
 - Conduct workshops to train departments on the new framework.
- **Perpetual Disaster Fund:**
 - Secure approval for the fund from the Council of the Cherokee Nation.
 - Establish fund governance policies and annual contribution guidelines.
- **Federal and Local Partnerships:**
 - Host collaboration meetings with FEMA, Red Cross, and local emergency management agencies.
 - Formalize Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to ensure effective coordination.

Responsible Parties:

- Emergency Management Team
 - Council of the Cherokee Nation
 - Finance Department
 - Senior Director of Public Safety
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Milestones:

- Tiered response framework adopted and integrated into the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP).
 - Disaster fund approved and operational.
 - MOUs signed with key federal and local partners.
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Tiered Disaster Response Framework

Overview of Tiers and Response Goals:

Each tier of disaster response is activated based on the severity and scale of the disaster, with increasing levels of resource commitment, timeframes, and financial support. This structured response ensures timely assistance and efficient resource allocation based on assessed needs.

Tier 1: Minor Disaster Response

Goal: Immediate stabilization and essential support.

- **Activation Criteria:** Minor disaster or localized incidents (e.g., small-scale flooding, short power outages) with limited impact on a small area and manageable with primary EMS and EM services.
 - **Duration:** 1-2 weeks.
 - **Financial Estimate:** Approximately \$50,000–\$150,000.
 - **Key Actions:**
 - **Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Emergency Management (EM):** Provide immediate on-site response and situational assessment.
 - **Disaster Portal:** Open for **1 week** to collect citizen needs.
 - **Financial Support:** Immediate assistance through **Human Services and Career Services** for essential relief funds (e.g., food, shelter).
 - **Citizen Communication:** Establish communication channels (hotline, online portal) for affected citizens to access resources.
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Tier 2: Moderate Disaster Response

Goal: Expanded response with resource mobilization for initial recovery and aid.

- **Activation Criteria:** Moderate disasters affecting multiple communities (e.g., severe storms or moderate flooding) require additional departmental support and extended relief.
 - **Duration:** 2-3 weeks.
 - **Financial Estimate:** Approximately \$200,000–\$500,000.
 - **Key Actions:**
 - **Emergency Management:** Remain on-site and coordinate ongoing assessments with local teams.
 - **Disaster Portal:** Open for **2 weeks** to collect and manage applications for assistance.
 - **Financial Support and Expanded Assistance:**
 - **Human Services and Career Services** expand financial support to citizens for emergency repairs and temporary housing.
 - **Debris and Damage Assessment Teams:** Mobilize **Management Resources, Health Facilities, and Natural Resources** teams to assess and report damage.
 - **Human Services and Immediate Aid On-Site:** Teams coordinate directly with affected citizens to assist with application submissions and distribute immediate aid.
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Tier 3: Major Disaster Response

Goal: Comprehensive recovery effort with total departmental mobilization for extended relief and community rebuilding.

- **Activation Criteria:** A large-scale or catastrophic disaster impacting extensive areas (e.g., a tornado or major flood) requiring full-scale recovery operations.
 - **Duration:** 3-4 weeks, with potential extensions based on need.
 - **Financial Estimate:** Approximately \$500,000–\$2 million.
 - **Key Actions:**
 - **Emergency Management and Incident Command:** Establish a primary incident command on-site for the duration, coordinating closely with the Council and senior officials for ongoing decision-making.
 - **Disaster Portal:** Open for **1 month** to ensure ongoing access for citizens requiring aid.
 - **Full Financial Support and Comprehensive Aid:**
 - **Human Services, Career Services, and Public Health** provide extensive support for housing, repairs, medical assistance, and other long-term needs.
 - **On-Site Debris Removal and Extended Services:**
 - **Management Resources, Natural Resources, Health Facilities, Human Services, Career Services, and Public Health** coordinate debris removal, environmental clean-up, and volunteer mobilization efforts.
 - Deploy teams to assist with **damage assessments, resource distribution, and healthcare services.**
 - **Volunteer Coordination and Long-Term Recovery Services:** Establish volunteer networks and coordinate community support for rebuilding efforts, including partnerships with local organizations, churches, and non-profits.
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Additional Guidelines for All Tiers

1. Defined Referral Protocol for Councilor Referrals:

- **Centralized Process:** The Council of the Cherokee Nation should direct all citizen referrals to the Emergency Management team to streamline support and ensure accurate tracking.
- **Clear Communication:** Provide councilors with a referral form and direct communication channel with the EM team to manage citizen needs consistently.

2. Ongoing Communication and Reporting:

- **Regular Updates:** EM provides situation updates to the Council, Chief of Staff, and Secretary of State throughout each tier's response period.
- **Post-Disaster Review and Adjustments:** Conduct a post-event review to assess effectiveness and refine protocols based on the disaster response's outcomes.

3. Annual Perpetual Disaster Fund:

- **Allocation:** Allocate funding specifically for community level disaster response.
- **Usage Protocols:** Define Principal Chief disaster declaration thresholds, usage guidelines, eligible assistance types, protocols for Councilors requesting local assistance and reporting requirements for fund use.

This **Tiered Disaster Response Framework** ensures that resources and response actions align with the severity of the disaster, providing a scalable, efficient approach that maintains clear lines of authority, optimizes resource allocation, and addresses citizens' immediate and long-term needs.

Phase 3: Training, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement (12-18 Months)

Objectives:

1. Conduct annual training and simulations.
2. Evaluate and refine disaster response protocols.
3. Fully implement data-driven decision-making capabilities.

Key Actions:

- **Annual Training and Simulations:**
 - Plan and execute full-scale disaster simulations involving all relevant departments and the Council of the Cherokee Nation.
 - Conduct post-simulation reviews to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
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- **Protocol Evaluation:**
 - Review the effectiveness of implemented recommendations after real-world application or simulations.
 - Update the EOP based on feedback and lessons learned.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:**
 - Integrate GIS mapping and analytics dashboards into disaster response workflows.
 - Provide training to field teams on leveraging these tools for situational awareness.

Responsible Parties:

- Emergency Management Team
- Information Technology Department
- Council of the Cherokee Nation

Milestones:

- Annual simulation exercise conducted and reviewed.
- Updated EOP reflecting lessons learned.
- Fully operational GIS mapping and analytics systems.

Monitoring and Reporting

To ensure accountability and progress:

- The Senior Director of Public Safety will submit quarterly reports to the Executive Administration detailing progress on implementation.
- The Task Force will reconvene semi-annually to review updates and address challenges.

The phased implementation plan prioritizes urgent actions while laying a foundation for sustainable, long-term improvements in Cherokee Nation's disaster response capabilities.

Conclusion

The Cherokee Nation Disaster Response Task Force's recommendations aim to establish a robust, scalable, and community-centered disaster management framework that strengthens the Nation's preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. By addressing key challenges such as authority and accountability, streamlined disaster declarations, and interdepartmental coordination, these measures will significantly enhance the Nation's ability to protect its citizens and infrastructure in the face of natural disasters.

Key Takeaways:

- **Strengthened Leadership:** Formalizing the Senior Director of Public Safety as the Emergency Czar ensures clear authority and accountability during disaster response, fostering decisive and effective leadership.
- **Timely Response:** Defined timelines for disaster declarations and tiered response frameworks will enable faster mobilization of resources and personnel.
- **Enhanced Infrastructure:** Improved technology, including upgrades to the disaster portal, will support real-time decision-making and citizen engagement.
- **Long-term Sustainability:** Establishing a perpetual disaster fund ensures financial readiness, reducing delays in providing aid to affected communities.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** Strengthening partnerships with federal and local agencies enhances resource availability and maximizes support for disaster relief and recovery.

The recommendations prioritize the well-being of Cherokee citizens, the efficiency of tribal resources, and the Nation's resilience against future disasters. By adopting and implementing these changes, the Cherokee Nation will set a new standard in disaster management and ensure the safety and prosperity of its people for generations to come.

Citations

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