

Top FEMA Official Is Fired Over Payments for N.Y.C. Migrant Shelters

The Trump administration fired the Federal Emergency Management Agency's chief financial officer and three others after Elon Musk misleadingly claimed the agency had used disaster relief funds for migrant services.



By Luis Ferré-Sadurní

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The Trump administration said on Tuesday that it had fired four employees from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, including the agency's chief financial officer, over their roles in disbursing federal funds to house migrants in New York City hotels.

The firings capped a startling chain of events that began on Monday with an early-morning social media post by Elon Musk who claimed, misleadingly, that FEMA had recently sent \$59 million meant for disaster relief to New York City to pay for “high end hotels” for migrants, and who called the expenditure unlawful.

New York City officials raced to clarify that the federal money had been properly allocated by FEMA under President Joseph R. Biden Jr. last year, adding that it was not a disaster relief grant and had not been spent on luxury hotels.

Nonetheless, just two hours after Mr. Musk's post, FEMA's acting director, Cameron Hamilton, announced that the payments in question “have all been suspended” — even though most of the money had already been disbursed — and that “personnel will be held accountable.”

By Tuesday morning, roughly 24 hours after Mr. Musk's post, the Trump administration had followed through on one part of its pledge.



Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees FEMA, said that the four employees had been terminated “for circumventing leadership to unilaterally make egregious payments for luxury N.Y.C. hotels for migrants.”

Ms. McLaughlin did not specify how the employees had undermined leadership, or how making payments previously appropriated by Congress amounted to unilateral conduct. But she said that those fired included two program analysts, a grant specialist and the agency’s chief financial officer, Mary Comans, whom FEMA’s website identifies as a “longtime public servant.”

“Under President Trump and Secretary Noem’s leadership, D.H.S. will not sit idly and allow deep-state activists to undermine the will and safety of the American people,” Ms. McLaughlin said in her statement, referring to the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem.

The swift firings underscored Mr. Musk’s growing influence over the federal government as the Trump administration moves to slash government spending and reshape the federal bureaucracy, purging civil servants along the way. Ms. Comans’s firing also appeared to rid FEMA, an agency that Mr. Trump and Ms. Noem have suggested should be eliminated, of the person responsible for managing its \$33 billion budget, which helps finance the government’s response to natural disasters.

It remains unclear if the Trump administration will move to claw back federal money that was appropriated by Congress under Mr. Biden to help New York City respond to the more than 230,000 migrants who have arrived there since 2022. Despite the public pronouncements, Liz Garcia, a spokeswoman for City Hall, said that the city had not been informed about any pause in funding.

Mr. Musk said that the payment of congressionally appropriated funds to the city, which he said was “discovered” by his government efficiency team, was unlawful and “in gross insubordination to the President’s executive order.”

He appeared to be referring to an order Mr. Trump issued on Jan. 20 that directed the homeland security secretary to review and pause distribution of federal funding to nongovernmental organizations providing services to “removable or illegal aliens.” It is unclear how the order would apply to payments made to the New York City government.

Mr. Musk, Mr. Hamilton and Ms. McLaughlin did not identify the FEMA payments in question. But they appeared to have been referring to payments made by the Shelter and Services Program, which Congress created in 2023 to dole out grants to groups and localities that provide shelter and other services to migrants who are released from D.H.S. custody after crossing the border.

The program, created under Mr. Biden as border crossings surged and overwhelmed big cities, has drawn intense criticism from Mr. Trump, who falsely claimed on the campaign trail last year that FEMA had spent all of its budget to house migrants, diverting disaster relief funds.

In reality, Congress allocated \$650 million to the shelter program through the Customs and Border Protection budget for the 2024 fiscal year. Payments issued by the program are administered by FEMA, but are separate from the billions of dollars the agency spends on disaster relief.

The shelter program has been used by Democratic cities like Denver and Chicago, but also by groups in Republican-led states, including Texas and Arizona.

New York City officials said that Congress appropriated \$237 million to the city last year to help reimburse it for a small portion of the more than \$7 billion the city and state have spent to shelter, feed and provide other services to migrants.

The city applied for the funds in April 2024 and FEMA began allocating them later in the year, city officials said. The \$59 million Mr. Musk referred to in his post, city officials said, appeared to be a payment from FEMA that the city received last week as part of that allocation. About \$19 million was spent on hotels, while the rest was used to pay for food, security and congregate shelters, city officials said.

“We have continued to receive previously allocated reimbursements through the past week,” Ms. Garcia, the City Hall spokeswoman, said in a statement. “We will discuss this matter directly with federal officials.”

New York City is currently sheltering 46,000 migrants, largely families with children, in converted warehouses, tent facilities and dozens of hotels, including old hotels in Midtown Manhattan and budget motels in other boroughs. City officials stressed that they do not pay “luxury-hotel rates.”

Federal funding accounts for a fraction of the money the city has spent to respond to the migrant crisis. But the uncertainty over the federal funds seemed to validate early fears among Democrats in New York City, including Mayor Eric Adams, that Mr. Trump could seek to withhold larger amounts of money for housing, transportation and infrastructure.

Some former senior officials at FEMA expressed alarm at the firings, saying that the employees had been fired for simply doing their jobs by distributing federal funds as directed by Congress.

But in New York, Republicans who have long expressed outrage over the use of taxpayer money for migrant services welcomed the news.

“You can’t just ignore what the commander in chief has said via executive order,” said Representative Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican from Staten Island.

Nicholas Fandos and Hamed Aleaziz contributed reporting. Sheelagh McNeill contributed research.

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