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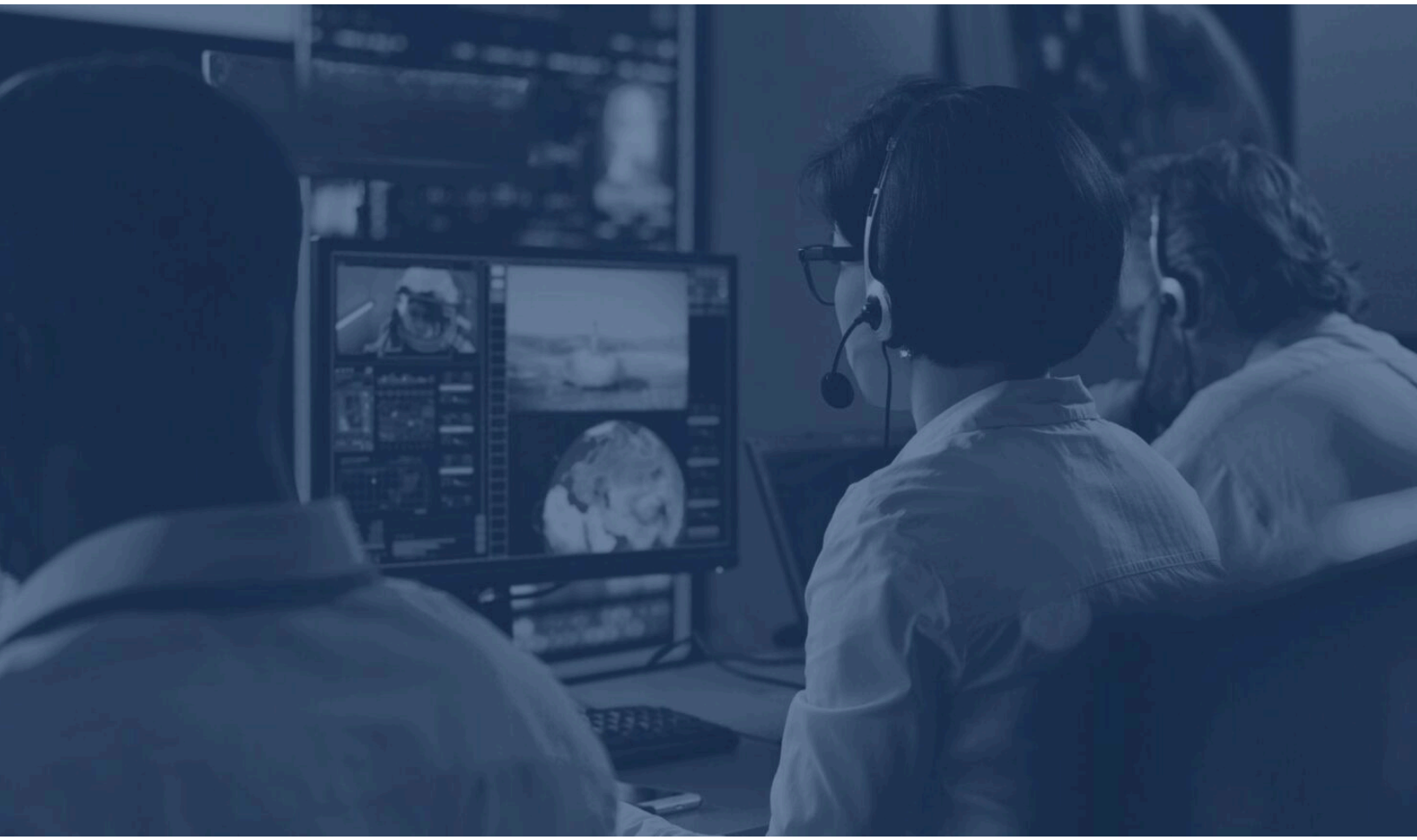

IMPROVING THE REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE (RFA) PROCESS

Hawaii's State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)

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Abstract

Between 2016 (when the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (HIEMA) upgraded to its current version of Web-based Emergency Operations Center (WebEOC) and accessible records began) and the end of 2024, Requests for Assistance (RFAs) submitted to the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) have a denied or canceled rate of just over one in four. This analysis aims to (1) identify some of the root causes of cancellation and denial of RFAs, and (2) propose mitigation strategies to reduce the rate of cancellation and denial of RFAs.

To accomplish these goals, this article combines literature and best practices surrounding resource allocation and prioritization with a dataset of over 2,000 RFAs representing 10 federally declared major disasters in Hawaii between the years of 2016 and 2024, of which just over one in four were either canceled or denied. Analysis of the RFAs reveals that the most common situations surrounding cancellation or denial were that the reason was unclear or not given, the issue prompting the request was solved locally, and the SEOC was unable to source the support needed.

To reduce this rate of cancellation and denial, this article proposes that the SEOC implement, both procedurally and culturally, improved transparency in the RFA process, and a system of resource typing and credentialing.

Overview

As described by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (2024a), beginning with the work of the Firefighting Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies (FIRESCOPE) group in the 1970s, carrying through the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS) (1970s-2004), and into the modern National Incident Management System (NIMS) (2004-present), resource prioritization and allocation has been a central pillar of emergency management in the United States. In the State of Hawaii, resource requests are handled online using a custom Web-based Emergency Operations Center (WebEOC) Request for Assistance (RFA)/Request for Information (RFI) board, which facilitates requests and tracks responses through assignment, planning, approval, deployment, and demobilization. Between 2016 and 2024, Hawaii's State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) received 2,151 RFAs during federally declared major disasters, 550 (25.6%) of which were canceled or denied.

While WebEOC serves as a tool to organize and track response actions, its effectiveness and accuracy depend on the people who use it. The system does not require users to elaborate on why an RFA is canceled or denied. Still, they can be generally grouped into one of the following nine buckets: unclear or not given, handled locally, resubmitted, combined, duplicative, unable to support, cost-prohibitive, bad request, or requester unresponsive. This article focuses on the three most common reasons: the reason is unclear or not given, the request was solved locally, and the

SEOC was unable to source state, federal, or other support. To reduce the rate of canceled and denied RFAs and enable future learning and refinement of the RFA process, Hawaii needs to adopt procedures and cultural shifts that embrace improved transparency and create a statewide resource typing and credentialing system.

Methodology

The research methodology used for this article includes a review of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Hawaii Emergency Management Agency best practices for resource allocation, and an analysis of a dataset of 2,151 RFAs submitted to the SEOC from 10 federally declared major disasters in Hawaii between the years of 2016 and 2024.

To ensure that the RFAs analyzed were representative of real disaster response needs stemming from impactful incidents, only RFAs from incidents that received federal major disaster declarations, where "the situation is beyond the capability of the State and affected local governments … is necessary" were considered (U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2024b). The 10 major disasters include six severe weather incidents, one hurricane (Lane in 2018), one volcanic eruption (Kilauea in 2018), a public health incident (COVID-19 in 2020), and a wildfire (Lahaina/Kula in 2023); FEMA disaster declaration numbers (DRs): DR-4282-HI, DR-4365-HI, DR-4366-HI, DR-4395-HI, DR-4510-HI, DR-4549-HI, DR-4604-HI, DR-4639-HI, DR-4724-HI, and DR-4793-HI. RFAs from exercises, planned events, and incidents that did not reach federal disaster declaration thresholds were excluded.

The most significant challenge in dealing with the RFA dataset was that Hawaii's WebEOC system does not require the user to give a reason when an RFA is canceled or denied. Rather than assign them arbitrarily to any of the initially identified categories (handled locally, resubmitted, combined, duplicative, unable to support, cost-prohibitive, bad request, or requester unresponsive), a new category had to be created to capture reasons unclear or not given. This category ended up being the most common for canceled and denied RFAs, accounting for 37% of the total, and obscuring the true reasons for their cancellation or denial.

Results and Findings

The most common situation surrounding the cancellation or closure of an RFA is that the reason is unclear or not given at all. These RFAs represent 37% of the total body of denied and canceled RFAs in Hawaii's federally declared disasters between 2016 and 2024. Within these RFAs, it is common to see "no longer needed" given as the reason for cancellation, but with no further details as to why there was no further need for the requested resource. True reasons for a resource no longer being needed can include factors such as budgetary and time constraints, changing situations, and conflicts with identified priorities. In other cases, no reason is given at all for cancellation or denial actions, with the RFA record only reflecting the actions themselves

and basic acknowledgement or confirmation communications. According to a senior Hawaii Emergency Management Agency Operations Branch employee, operators sometimes do not give reasons for cancellation or denial because "some of [the rationale] is need to know, decisions are made above the level of the operator, or specifics may include For Official Use Only, confidential, or other information that does not belong in the public record" (J. Wong, personal communication, July 8, 2025). While those are valid reasons for denial or cancellation, they are often not explicitly stated in the RFA record, leaving SEOC staff, both during and after the incident, unclear about the ultimate reason an RFA could not be executed.

The next most common reason for cancellation or denial, accounting for 18% of the total, is that the problem the resource or capability was intended to solve was resolved locally outside the RFA process. Although the RFA/RFI Board already requires requesters to attest that "We have expended all our jurisdiction or organizational resources and cannot obtain what is required through our capabilities or the private sector" to submit an RFA, the requester finding a local solution after submitting a request remains a common occurrence (Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, 2025). From the records researched for this article, this situation can come in the form of local resources turning up where the requester had assumed they were exhausted, private options not having been explored thoroughly, or the requester finding novel, creative solutions that had not been considered prior to submission.

The third most common justification for denial and cancellation, given at 11% of the total, was that the SEOC was unable to support the request. Similar to the top reason, this category offers only slightly more insight into the real reason an RFA was canceled or denied, unclear or not given. The underlying request represents a valid need, but a solution could not be found within the reach of the state EOC (including state, federal, and private resources). It could be that no such capability exists, that the request is outside of the scope of the state's current response (both geographically and in terms of priorities and objectives), that the solution would take too long to be practical, or that there are budgetary or time constraints in play. Without more detail in the record, it is impossible to tell why the SEOC was unable to support, though it is important to note that this is a more actionable and understandable situation with reasons unclear or not given.

Two of these issues can be addressed through a commitment to increased transparency in the RFA process, both as a process/policy decision and as a cultural shift. At the core of both the unclear or not given category and the unable to support category is a lack of transparency from both the requester (in the case of a canceled RFA) and the SEOC or the tasked agency (in the case of a denied RFA). To rectify this, all stakeholders involved in requesting resources or responding to requests must commit to a higher level of honesty and transparency in RFA communications. When a request is submitted, requesters are asked to "Be specific; Answer the what, where, when, how long questions," and that same level of detail should be required to close an RFA (Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, 2019). Factors in the decision to cancel

or deny such as time, cost, achievability, priority, and others, should be clearly explained in the WebEOC record prior to the actual cancellation or denial and closure.

Naturally, there is a limit to how far a WebEOC user should go in the pursuit of transparency. Personal opinions, guesses, complaints, and other commentary are not appropriate for the official WebEOC record. Final actions like completing, canceling, denying, or closing RFAs should be done by the responsible party, and not by another in their stead. Where that is not possible, users need to use direct and complete quotes that include attribution; paraphrasing or summarizing the words of others should be kept to a minimum. While these changes can be taught to staff and changes can be made to the WebEOC system to force action (such as requiring a reason prior to cancellation or denial), no policy or system change will be effective until emergency managers in Hawaii commit to integrating transparency into the RFA process and into the state's RFA culture.

The implementation of a statewide resource credentialing and typing system has the potential to significantly reduce the rate at which RFAs are resolved locally after submission. As of the writing of this article, there is no agreed-upon and adopted resource credentialing and typing system in Hawaii. "This results in uncertainty as to what resources are available, as well as what they are capable of doing. A consequence is a lack of clear understanding of the resources engaged in the response and also inefficiencies in resource tasking" (Callahan & Smiley, 2014). Reducing uncertainty about the counties' and state's actual resources will enable county and state planning and operations staff to allocate resources more effectively and gain a clearer understanding of the local inventory's capabilities and when to seek assistance. Per the NIMS Guideline for Resource Management Preparedness, "Planning can help a jurisdiction or organization identify what kinds of resources and what capabilities may be necessary if an incident's demands exceed current capabilities" (U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2021). As an added benefit, that same preplanning work will also reduce wait times for RFAs to be tasked, planned, sourced, and deployed, as some of the research/discussion process will have been completed ahead of time. As of early 2025, Hawaii is in the process of developing the Hawaii Qualification System (HQS), which includes resource typing and credentialing adopted from FEMA's National Qualification System (NQS) and Resource Typing Library Tool.

The existence of HQS on its own, however, will not solve the problem. Inventories of equipment and resources, Mission Ready Packages, pre-scripted RFAs, and other useful features of a centralized credentialing and typing system will only work if they are adopted and used by the state and counties. All jurisdictions in the U.S. have had access to NQS since its introduction in 2017. Nearly a decade later, states like Hawaii are still in the process of program development and implementation, with timelines largely driven by the federal Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) deadline of the end of fiscal year 2025 to implement NQS or an equivalent local program (U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2022). Similar to the first issue of transparency, while there are policy and program solutions that can be put in place,

the overall success of these measures will be driven by the willingness of state and county emergency managers to undergo cultural shifts. All partners in emergency management must embrace transparency and HQS and make those provisions part of their own internal plans and processes, creating a culture of accurate reporting, resource typing, defining, and preplanning that will lead to a reduction in situations where local resources were available and utilized after a request for state or federal support was already submitted.

Lessons Learned

The author's initial assumptions about the research for this article were that it would explore the more predictable reasons for RFA cancellation and denial, such as cost concerns or poorly written requests. While there were RFAs that fell into those categories, they accounted for only small percentages of the total at only 2% and 5%, respectively. The massive prevalence of RFA cancellations and denials, often with unclear or unspecified reasons, means these RFAs overshadow all the rest. If the original requesters or operators had provided more detail when closing those RFAs, the dataset used in this analysis and, by extension, the recommendations made in this article, might look radically different. Until a greater level of transparency is achieved, it will be difficult for the SEOC to analyze and learn from past RFAs.

That issue aside, however, the original intent of the research and the related findings were met; there are identifiable and actionable areas for improvement in the RFA process that will decrease the rate at which RFAs are denied or canceled. The actions prescribed in this article, however, are only a starting point. Unaddressed reasons for cancellation or denial in this article include RFAs that were resubmitted, combined, or duplicative, as well as those that were cost-prohibitive, bad requests, or RFAs where the requester was unresponsive. Each of those categories represents an opportunity for further analysis and recommendations to reduce or eliminate those situations.

Summary

RFAs made to the SEOC in Hawaii are canceled or denied at a rate of just over one in four. While there are multiple reasons why an RFA might fail to reach execution, the three most common situations in the SEOC's records are that the reason was unclear or not given, that the requested capability was sourced locally, and that the SEOC could not source the support requested. These three contributors to cancellations and denials can be addressed through a combination of increased transparency, the implementation of the HQS, and cultural shifts that adopt and integrate transparency and HQS into the fabric of emergency management in Hawaii. Increased transparency in the RFA process will make it clearer to all users the real reasons that RFAs are canceled or denied, allowing all to learn and improve. The implementation of HQS will enable preplanning of capabilities and needs, allowing all responders to utilize a shared capability definition set when requesting or deploying resources. This, in turn, will reduce the

rate at which local solutions are necessary, but only after escalating a request to the state or federal level. Both transparency and HQS implementation require updates to basic processes or procedures, as well as cultural shifts, as emergency managers adopt and integrate them into their regular plans and actions.

For the SEOC, these changes equate to improved efficiency. RFAs will be more accurate and RFA Managers and response partners will better understand what is being requested and what is on hand. When denials and cancellations occur, the SEOC can analyze the underlying reasons and implement changes based on its after-action review and corrective action process. Although cancellations and denials are inevitable, reducing the current rate of 25.6% would significantly enhance SEOC's efficiency and efficacy in the long term. While improved efficiency is something any EOC would enjoy, the ultimate beneficiaries of these improvements in the RFA process are the people of Hawaii. In disaster situations, it is their needs that must be captured and fulfilled by emergency managers, and when the RFA process breaks down or is inefficient, it is Hawaii's residents and communities that suffer. If emergency managers can reduce the rate at which RFAs are not executed, more time and effort can be spent on RFAs that can be executed. Critical needs can be communicated, received, planned for, and met sooner with better-tailored solutions. The entire RFA process, from local need discovery to state and partner solution delivery, becomes more efficient and effective as cancellation and denial rates of RFAs decrease.

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Appendix A

Table A-1: Canceled and Denied RFA Summary by Incident

FEMA Incident Name	WebEOC Incident Name	Total RFAs	RFAs Canceled/ Denied	%
Hawaii Severe Storms, Flooding, and Landslides (DR-4793-HI)	2024-06 April Rain	5	2	40.0%
Hawaii Wildfires (DR-4724-HI)	2023-21 Counties Brushfires	524	149	28.4%
Hawaii Severe Storms, Flooding, and Landslides (DR-4639-HI)	21-12-02 December Severe Weather	3	1	33.3%
Hawaii Severe Storms, Flooding, and Landslides (DR-4604-HI)	21-03-08 Severe Weather/Flooding	13	6	46.2%
Hawaii Severe Storms and Flooding (DR-4549-HI)	No incident created	0	0	N/A
Hawaii Covid-19 Pandemic (DR-4510-HI)	20-01-24 COVID-19	1251	285	22.8%
Hawaii Hurricane Lane (DR-4395-HI)	18-08-18 Hurricane Lane	60	29	48.3%
Hawaii Kilauea Volcanic Eruption and Earthquakes (DR-4366-HI)	18-05-02 Kilauea East Rift Zone Event	204	52	25.5%
Hawaii Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides (DR-4365-HI)	18-04-14 Wainiha/Waikoko Landslides	84	26	31.0%
Hawaii Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides (DR-4282-HI)	16-09-13 Maui Flood	7	0	0.0%
	TOTAL:	**2151**	**550**	**25.6%**

Table A-2: Canceled and Denied RFAs by Reason for Cancelation/Denial

Incident	Unclear/Not Given	Handled locally	Resubmitted	Combined	Duplicated Effort	Unable to support	Cost Prohibitive	Bad Request	Requester Unresponsive	Total of Canceled /Denied per Incident
4793	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
4274	42	35	8	12	17	17	9	9	0	149
4639	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
4604	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
4549	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4510	90	53	23	32	26	36	1	14	10	285
4395	22	2	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	29
4366	33	2	2	3	4	3	0	5	0	52
4365	12	3	0	5	1	5	0	0	0	26
4282	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total # of Canceled/Denied	**205**	**98**	**34**	**52**	**48**	**63**	**10**	**30**	**10**	**550**
Total % of Canceled/Denied	**37%**	**18%**	**6%**	**9%**	**9%**	**11%**	**2%**	**5%**	**2%**	**100%**

About the Author

Jacob P. Bateman is an Operations Specialist with the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (HIEMA). HIEMA serves the state of Hawaii by leading disaster preparation, mitigation, response, and recovery. As an Operations Specialist, Jacob serves in the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) in various Incident Command System (ICS) roles, most commonly as Operations Section Chief. He has served as Operations Section Chief in Hawaii's SEOC during many emergencies and disasters, most notably including COVID-19, the 2022 Mauna Loa eruption, and the 2023 Maui Wildfires.

Jacob earned his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with a certificate in Emergency Management from Brigham Young University - Hawaii, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude. He is also a graduate of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Advanced Academy as part of the first-ever, Hawaii-based cohort.

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