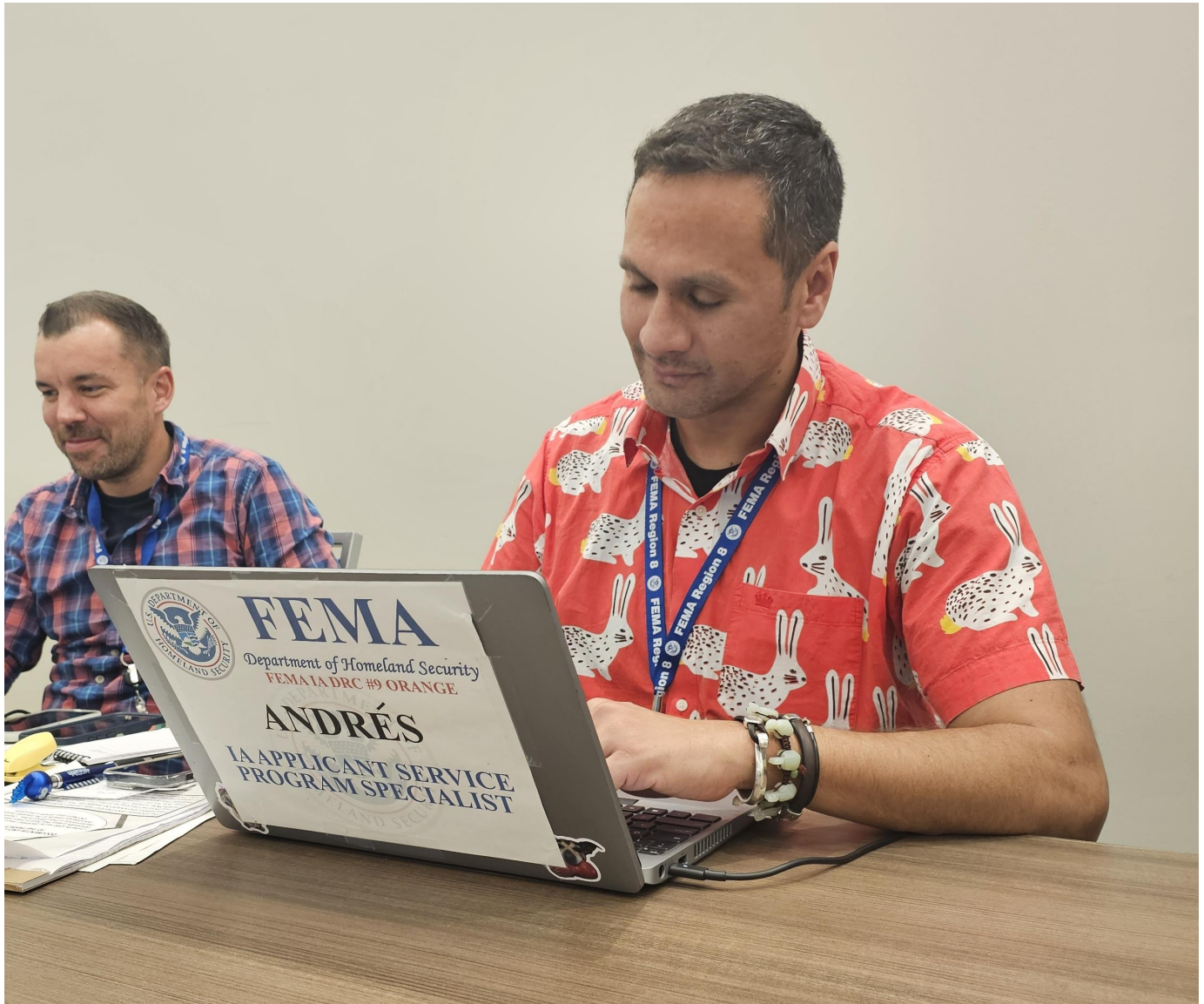


## DRLA alumni say the program prepared them to work at FEMA

December 12, 2024 1:00 PM Stephanie Holden  
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Andy Meléndez Salgado, C-DRL recipient, works on his laptop while deployed in North Carolina.

After back-to-back hurricanes in the South, disaster resources are stretched thin. FEMA has hundreds of active operation sites nationwide. After Hurricane Helene, more than 5,000 FEMA employees – including all three of the people interviewed

below – deployed to help disaster survivors. Still, there is a [marked shortage of FEMA employees](#). And as climate change continues to increase the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, the need for disaster resilience professionals only increases.

Alumni from Tulane School of Social Work's [Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy](#) (DRLA) work in every division and facet of FEMA. We spoke with three of them to get an idea of the breadth of their work, the ways DRLA prepared them for the job, and how current students can step into disaster response roles.

## **Disaster Response**

After graduating with her [Master of Science in Disaster Resilience Leadership](#) (MS-DRL) in 2013, Kimberly Grisham worked for FEMA as a reservist during Hurricane Sandy recovery and then as a Voluntary Agency Liaison.

Now, she's a Public Assistance Specialist. Her team runs community service programs, supervises disaster survivor assistance team development, builds trainings, and coordinates with different agencies to create plans that prepare communities for disaster.

"All disasters start locally, and local communities are the key to all disaster response," said Grisham. "We don't come in and solve the problems for people. You can't ignore the local communities, the local nonprofits, the people who were doing this work before you. You can't push your way in and expect not to be pushed back."

On 'blue sky days,' or periods without active emergencies, Grisham's team builds relationships with the groups who would be essential in the event of a disaster.

"Coalition-building is probably the biggest thing that we do to try to get our states and territories and tribes talking with us, talking with each other, developing their plans," said Grisham. "There's so much that FEMA does that is not disasters."

## **Disaster Recovery**

Prior to receiving her MS-DRL in 2016, Heather Milton had a career in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Milton's engineering firm was contracted by FEMA to provide GIS staff for the recovery work. After volunteering with GISCorps to map communities after several more disasters,

she decided to pursue recovery and resilience work full-time.

Now, Milton is a Community Assistance Manager in FEMA's Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC) Division, which coordinates technical assistance to governmental, tribal, nonprofit, and private sector groups as they plan their recovery. In short, her team helps assess what (mostly federal) programs and resources might be able to best accelerate recovery.

"In the time of climate change, we really want our communities and our states to be focused on building back better," Milton said. "We are a proponent for climate-conscious rebuilding and recovery."

More than rebuilding, Milton sees recovery work as an opportunity to change a community's future. In the wake of a disaster, regions often capture more attention, donations, and resources than they could ever expect day-to-day.

"The community work is what drives me. We want places to become more livable," said Milton. "Recovery is a good time to grow and improve people's communities because FEMA is there to help."

## **Disaster Preparedness**

Andy Meléndez Salgado is a disaster social work professional. Now a National Preparedness Division Continuous Improvement Advisor at FEMA, Meléndez Salgado received his [Certificate in Disaster Resilience Leadership](#) (C-DRL) as part of his ongoing PhD in City, Culture, and Community.

With a background in public health, Meléndez Salgado said the foundational knowledge provided by the certificate changed his understanding of disaster resilience.

"DRLA has a multidisciplinary approach to addressing disasters," Meléndez Salgado said. "Those foundational courses made me think better about how social structures and disasters interplay. It gave me a broader perspective."

Within National Preparedness, Meléndez Salgado works in continuous improvement; his team assesses how disaster operations work and identifies challenges and lessons that can be attributed to the field at large.

“Every disaster operation has an assessment afterward. One of the core competencies of DRLA was Measurement and Evaluation, which is my entire function at FEMA,” said Meléndez Salgado. “It’s like if you took that class and turned it into a job.”

## **Disaster Resilience**

Emergency managers are often ill-equipped to deal with the mental health impact of disasters on community members, businesses, and society at large. DRLA’s emphasis on humanity, dignity, and cultural competence is what makes it unique.

“I really appreciated the trauma and mental health aspect of the program when I was at Tulane,” Grisham said. “I didn’t see a lot of that when I entered the workplace, but in the last two to three years, I’ve been seeing an increased focus on mental health and trauma-informed care.”

With a social work lens, disaster recovery employees can focus on what interventions and solutions make sense for the local people and cultures, ultimately making the work more effective.

“Anybody trained as a social worker will have an advantage at FEMA,” Milton said. “The most important thing you can give people who have gone through trauma is the space to express themselves and tell their stories. Until you do that, it’s very hard for people to take the steps they need to take to recover.”

And as Meléndez Salgado said – for our students and alumni, “helping people is what it’s all about.”

## **Advice for Current Students**

Despite the ample preparation DRLA provides its students for work with FEMA, securing a federal agency job can still be difficult. Our alumni suggest researching FEMA’s pay grades and benefits ([FEMA reservists’ jobs are federally protected while deployed!](#)), learning how to write a federal resume, and maintaining faith, even if it takes a few months to hear back about an application.

More than that, they encourage students and graduates to keep looking until they find a function that fits their interests.

“Disaster work is not one thing. All systems and structures are impacted at some level by disasters and emergencies. Most, if not all functions, can have a disaster lens,” Meléndez Salgado said. “Don’t think disaster work is one career path, one answer, one approach. The path is what you make of it.”

*FEMA has a reservist referral program. If you’re a current or former Tulane School of Social Work student, reach out about a referral.*