

Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management
Remote Operations Center Written Justification
ARPA-24-115-356

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Description of Harm or Need:

The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that rural communities may have characteristics that can make recovering from a disaster difficult as they do not have the capacity and resources to support recovery activities.¹ The Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) is in need of two emergency remote operations facilities in Eastern and Western Hidalgo County to mitigate the challenges of COVID-19 and its negative economic impacts, specifically in rural and unincorporated areas in the community. It is important to remember that some communities have experienced substantial and pervasive historical inequities, which can pose challenges. The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) is the coordination structure for collecting, analyzing, and sharing information which helps to integrate stakeholders and works with senior officials to facilitate the development of policy direction for incident support. These emergency remote operations centers (ROC) would serve as emergency response and recovery support operations during incidents in the outlying areas of Hidalgo County to better position the emergency management response to incidents. Furthermore, the centers would facilitate medical testing, mass vaccination, disaster preparation services, disaster response services, and disaster mitigation services in rural and unincorporated areas situated in Hidalgo County Precincts 1 and 3. It is important to note that Hidalgo County is currently at a Level 2 as per the Local Health Department

1

<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106755#:~:text=The%20Disaster%20Assistance%20for%20Rural,seeking%20disaster%20assistance%20from%20SBA>

Operational Levels and Indicators as seen below from normal being the lowest and Level 1 ranking the highest.²

Normal Operations - Routine Operations
 Level 4 - Enhanced Operations
 Level 3 - Increased Readiness Operations
 Level 2 - Escalated Operations
 Level 1 - Emergency Response Operations

The goal is to reduce barriers and increase access to services for our vulnerable and underserved populations in these areas. In 2022, the United States Census Bureau Quick Facts population estimate for Hidalgo County is recorded at 888,367. With the population increasing by almost 2% every two years, the need for adequate access to services and resources is critical and life saving to resolve emergency situations.

As per the Center for Disease Control COVID Data Tracker,³ only 118,268 have received the Updated (Bivalent) Booster Dose, and the County’s hospital admission level is Medium.

Vaccinations in Hidalgo County, Texas

People Vaccinated	At Least One Dose	Completed Primary Series	Updated (Bivalent) Booster Dose
Total	1,083,123	697,621	118,268
% of Total Population	95%	80.3%	13.6%
Population ≥ 5 Years of Age	1,069,489	696,138	118,215
% of Population ≥ 5 Years of Age	95%	87.7%	14.9%
Population ≥ 12 Years of Age	940,485	630,580	114,540
% of Population ≥ 12 Years of Age	95%	92.3%	16.8%
Population ≥ 18 Years of Age	798,949	538,785	109,465
% of Population ≥ 18 Years of Age	95%	91.4%	18.6%
Population ≥ 65 Years of Age	118,494	93,130	31,873
% of Population ≥ 65 Years of Age	95%	94.7%	32.4%

Furthermore, the Community Resilience Estimates (CRE)⁴ provides estimates of the total number of people living in a community by the number of risk

² <https://www.hidalgocounty.us/2630/Coronavirus-Updates>

³

https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view?list_select_state=Texas&data-type=Vaccinations&list_select_county=48215

⁴

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/community-resilience-estimates/technical-documentation/methodology.html>

factors. This includes estimates for the following groups, with Hidalgo County at a 3 as per the My Community Explorer.⁵

The number of people with:

- 0 risk factors (Low risk)
- 1-2 risk factors (Medium risk)
- 3 or more risk factors (High risk)

This data clearly demonstrates the need for Hidalgo County to mobilize a plan to prevent public health disasters. Currently, Hidalgo County has one centralized location to administer emergency assistance to all residents. Although the County can set up alternative sites for emergency situations, the security of having permanent locations equipped with necessary and life-saving resources, tools and personnel will provide a long-term and sustainable solution both for the county and its residents. This permanency would also allow for greater planning, preparedness and response times during post disaster periods that would strengthen recovery efforts limiting delayed or interrupted critical services. The development of two new locations, especially for those who are unable to travel, would ease the burden of access for emergency services so that individuals and families are able to access direct services closer to home and when they need them to speed up economic and social recovery and allow the community to resume “normalcy.” As previously stated, these facilities can provide a location for the immediacy of accessible services to marginalized populations for mass medical testing, mass vaccination, supply distribution, sandbag distribution, SBA processing, FEMA processing, community outreach, and other services needed when responding to an emergency. Furthermore, these remote centers can serve as conduits for community partners, such as the Hidalgo County Community Service Agency, to provide direct emergency efforts quickly and efficiently to the most vulnerable populations during critical times of need. Most importantly, the addition of such facilities would greatly empower the County of Hidalgo to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to and recover from incidents in alignment with the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) national preparedness goal to leverage health equity.⁶

⁵

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/13a111e06ad242fba0fb62f25199c7dd/page/Page-1/?views=EM-Layer-List>

⁶ <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/goal>

Justification of a Capital Expenditure:

The Emergency Remote Operations Centers (ROCs) would bring area-specific emergency operations services, including, but not limited to, resources, information crisis, and emergency risk communication to strengthen the county's ability to detect and effectively respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and any future public health emergencies. The ROCs, in direct coordination with OEM, would directly support the response and recovery from the COVID-19 public health emergency and its lingering impacts. Still, they would also strengthen and improve the infrastructure necessary for participation in work, education, and health monitoring that will last beyond the pandemic. The ROCs would be more sustainable, secured, and strategically located, fully capable of integration with the focus on addressing identified deficiencies and the needs of the county in the most outlying areas. Having two strategically located facilities to provide services in remote areas such as rural colonias is necessary to ensure the continuity of operations and continuity of government in major disasters or emergencies. Hidalgo County plans to prepare each facility with sufficient office space for the following essential personnel: one to four full time staff members who will operate, manage, and serve as key resources during emergency operations, 20 county employees who will serve and function as support staff, and two switchboard operators to manage the county's resident helpline during emergencies. The facilities will include but are not limited to restrooms, showers, a kitchenette, storage, radio/communications cubicles, paved parking, fencing, apparatus bays, door entrances, public address systems, backup generators, furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FF&E).

The Department of Treasury, 31 CFR Part 35, includes the 'construction of emergency operations centers and acquisition of emergency response equipment' as an eligible capital expenditure through ARPA funding.⁷ The remote operations centers will serve as extensions to the Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management Operations Center. Under the direction of OEM, the ROCs will support strategic organizational collaboration and integration of community stakeholders to plan, combine resources, and provide services for incident support in rural communities. Community stakeholders may include

⁷ Department of the Treasury. (2022). Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. *Federal Register*, 87(18), p. 4354

– social services entities, healthcare facilities, local public health departments, law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services (EMS), and other local, state, and federal agencies dependent on the incident type. The proposed remote operations centers will facilitate disaster preparation services, disaster response services, and disaster mitigation services in the outlying areas of Precinct 1 and Precinct 3. These facilities will permit staff to remain in a safe environment during an emergency response and recovery and ensure the continuity of operations and government in major disasters or emergencies by protecting the health and resilience of families and communities.

Comparison of Proposed Capital Expenditure Against

Hidalgo County is committed to providing the community with long-term services. To that end, a Type 1 Building (fire-resistive, high-rise building made of concrete and protected steel) would be the best and safest option. Hidalgo County has researched various options to determine the best alternative for this capital investment. In making the best decision, several options were taken into consideration including retrofitting, leasing, and new construction. To provide transparency and clarity on the two sites, analysis has been conducted to demonstrate the fiscal impact that is best suitable for the scope of this project.

Prior to researching the best alternative, we took the following facility support information into consideration to ensure that jurisdiction-based needs are met:

- The location must be up to 10,000 square feet to meet the space requirements for a Remote Operations Center (ROC). There must be sufficient office space for a maximum of one to four full-time staff members, 20 county employees who serve and function as support staff, and at least two switchboard operators that manage the county's resident helpline during emergencies.
- Minimal amenities include: restrooms, showers, a kitchenette, storage, radio/communications cubicles, paved parking, fencing, and apparatus bays, door entrances, and a backup generator.
- The location must not be in a flood-prone area.
- Abide by state and local building codes to avoid operating locations

- with significant risks.
- Accessibility

Eastern and Western Hidalgo County

Retrofitting -

There are no available and suitable County owned buildings in the outlying areas of Eastern and Western Hidalgo County that meet the unique needs for this project to adequately serve the needs of our residents.

Leasing -

We researched various listings for buildings of up to 10,000 square feet in both Eastern and Western Hidalgo County and found that there were limited to no listings available within these rural and unincorporated areas. The goal is to ensure that these centers are located in the center of these communities and that access to services is in reach. Below are the listings that we were the strongest matches for comparison and closest to these rural areas.

Eastern Hidalgo County:

We found three listings (Attachment A). The first listing is a 1776 square foot building for lease at \$18 per square foot with a cost estimate of \$31,988 per year. At 10 years, this lease would be \$381,456; however, this is only 20% of the ideal space. It would not meet any of the pre-established criteria nor be suitable for emergency situations. Our 2nd and 3rd listings were for sale at \$950,000 for 7848 square feet and \$975,00 for 6776 square feet. These costs do not include retrofitting needed to bring the buildings up to code.

Western Hidalgo County:

We found three listings (Attachment B). The first listing is a 7,020 square foot building for lease at \$25.80 per square foot with a cost estimate of \$2,173,392 per year. A cost projection of 10 years would be \$21,733,920. The second 6,552 square foot listing price is estimated at \$90,000 per year with \$7,500 monthly lease. The final listing is a 6688 square foot commercial building that is for sale at \$350,000; however, is in much disrepair.

In summary, leasing facilities that have a monthly recurring cost is not a

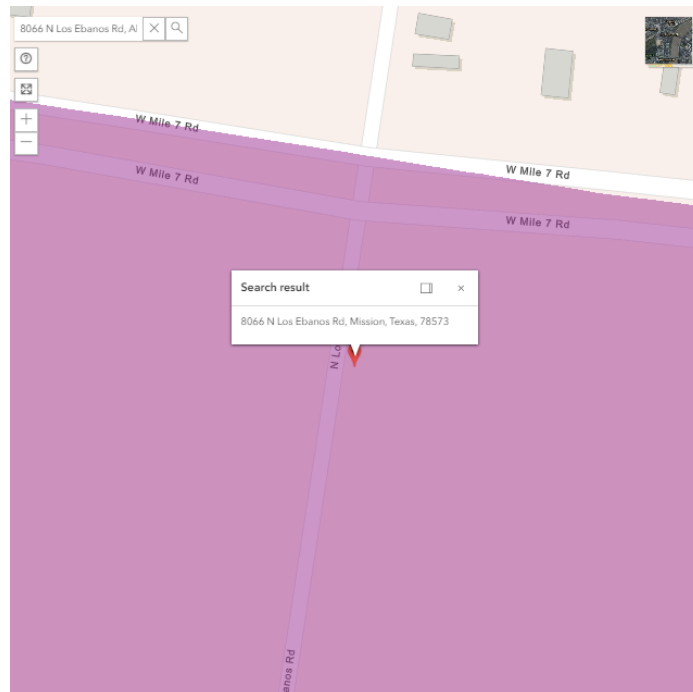
financially sound or cost-effective long-term option. Let us not forget that these listings do not align to the pre-established criteria including radio and communication installations and will require improvements that need to meet state and local requirements. Moreover these facilities need to withstand the impacts of potential hazards. In comparison to new construction on county owned property at \$3 million, leasing is not a financially sound or effective long-term option as there will be a perpetual budgetary impact to the Hidalgo County budget.

New Construction -

While researching possible locations in the Western (Precinct 3) and Eastern (Precinct 1) Hidalgo County, two County owned properties were selected for the development of remote emergency operation centers that would be nearest to the most vulnerable populations that require support during emergency situations. Attachment C provides a preliminary cost estimate beginning at \$300 per square foot with the possibility of potential cost-savings measures to be identified in the future with a detailed cost estimate that would include the pre-established criteria that would be well-equipped for re-establishing community lifelines after a disaster. These centers will be in the center of these rural areas and provide immediate needs-based jurisdictional support and resources.

These ROCs will be strategically located in qualified census tracts and low-to-moderate areas as these populations have greater socioeconomic challenges and the proximity to critical infrastructure is a priority. New construction of two Emergency Remote Operations Centers that will serve as fully functional facilities for disaster preparation, response, and mitigation services during emergencies and the ongoing response of COVID-19 is the superior alternative as the proposed facilities are expected to provide fully functional support for outlying areas for more than 30 years. The cost would run at approximately \$3 million for up to 10,000 square foot Type 1 buildings constructed of concrete and steel making them non-combustible and secure from hurricane-force winds to provide continuous operations supporting the county during response and recovery. The ROCs will promote equitable outcomes in the rural and unincorporated communities.

In Western Hidalgo County, we have 8066 N Los Ebanos Rd, Alton, TX, 78573, which is directly located in a qualified census tract (QCT) area.



In Eastern Hidalgo County, we have 708 East Edinburg Ave., Elsa, TX, 78543.

LMISD by Place: Elsa city

GEOID	4824036
NAME	Elsa city
PLACE_TYPE	Incorporated City/Town
STATE	48
STUSAB	TX
LOW	3,385.00
LOWMOD	4,660.00
LMMI	5,495.00
LOWMODUNIV	6,445.00
LOWMOD_PCT	72.30
UCLOWMOD	
UCLOWMOD_P	0.00