



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Supporting Underserved Communities in Emergency Management

July 19, 2022

It is a fact that disasters do not impact all people equally. Underserved communities, including older adults, communities of color, individuals with access and functional needs, children, and low-income individuals are more susceptible to the risks associated with disasters and are often overlooked during emergencies, making it significantly more difficult for them to recover. We have seen time and time again when underserved communities fair considerably worse after disasters. Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, Maria, and Ida are prime examples of how disasters can disproportionately impact underserved populations.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit some of the poorest states, including Mississippi. I saw firsthand how Katrina devastated my community and how difficult it was for underserved communities to recover. The storm left the poorest even more vulnerable and uncovered longstanding inequities. In 2017, Hurricane Maria left nearly 3,000 people dead in Puerto Rico, most of whom were elderly and low-income individuals. More needs to be done for underserved communities, especially since we keep seeing the pattern of people left without the assistance they need.

Over the years, the Committee on Homeland Security has worked to address the needs of underserved communities in emergencies. I would like to commend my dear friend, Representative Payne, for his bill, the *Homeland Security for Children Act*, being signed into law on June 6th. This new law is a major step toward ensuring children's needs are considered during disasters. Looking ahead, extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity, and vulnerable communities are the ones suffering and will continue to suffer unless we improve emergency preparedness and develop resilient infrastructure within underserved communities.

The climate crisis is, unfortunately, our new normal, and we must invest in underserved communities and provide mitigation resources to prevent more loss of life. The Biden Administration has taken several steps to address underserved populations including adjusting documentation requirements for Federal disaster assistance in response to longstanding challenges. Additionally, the Biden Administration has made it their central goal to address the needs of different communities by ensuring that FEMA and other agencies incorporate equity into their program and policies. Nonetheless, more can and must be done.

After seeing several gaps in the Federal government's response to disasters and how it distributes assistance, I, along with Chairwoman Demings and Senator Elizabeth Warren, introduced the *FEMA Equity Act*. This legislation will improve data collection at FEMA and direct the Agency to integrate equity criteria throughout its programming. It will also empower local governments affected by natural disasters to request an emergency or major disaster declaration when requests are not submitted by the

State. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the challenges underserved communities face in disasters and how Congress could help to better support them.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978