



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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

### ***FEMA: Building a Workforce Prepared and Ready to Respond***

**January 20, 2022**

I would like to thank the FEMA workforce for their service to the country. In my home state of Mississippi, we have a lot of experience with disasters, unfortunately, and know the value of having a strong FEMA workforce.

FEMA has continued to help communities respond to and recover from natural disasters. Meanwhile, it has carried out critical parts of the Federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and supported other Federal agencies in the care of unaccompanied children at the border and the resettlement of Afghan allies. FEMA has been challenged with responding to multiple large-scale disasters while simultaneously being pulled into other important missions. This workload has hindered efforts to address workforce challenges, including hiring, training, and retention.

The frequency and intensity of natural disasters due to climate change have only exacerbated these workforce challenges. In 2017, we saw the direct impact of a FEMA workforce that was understaffed, undertrained, and overwhelmed when three major storms made landfall in the span of less than a month. We need a robust FEMA workforce that is prepared to handle our new reality, which includes extreme weather events, pandemics, and other evolving threats.

My concern about FEMA's workforce strength is not new. In 2019, then-FEMA Administrator Peter Gaynor testified before this Committee that the FEMA workforce had a staffing deficit of a "few thousand." However, I regularly hear from constituents that they do not receive a response from FEMA when they apply for a job. There appears to be a disconnect. The agency has also struggled with issues of harassment and discrimination within the workplace, which is undoubtedly undermines efforts to build a strong workforce.

Additionally, I continue to be concerned about the agency's lack of diversity, particularly in leadership roles. The workforce should be diverse and represent the country in order to provide, equitable, and comprehensive disaster assistance. For these reasons, I am glad the Biden Administration demonstrated early on that strengthening the FEMA workforce would be a priority. The President's Fiscal Year 2022 budget request focuses on filling critical gaps in the agency's overall staffing, with a particular emphasis on strengthening the incident management workforce.

Moreover, FEMA's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan names building a diverse and stronger workforce within FEMA as key objectives. The plan further seeks to improve equity and increase the availability and quality of training and educational opportunities for the emergency management workforce. These are promising steps by the Biden Administration, but more work needs to be done.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the challenges FEMA faces and what Congress can do to aid them in making FEMA's workforce stronger.

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