

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

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Submitted

By

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Chairman D’Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the future of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). We value this committee’s support and oversight of our agency, and I look forward to our conversation today.

FEMA has a powerful mission statement, spelled out in just seven words: helping people before, during, and after disasters. That mission statement is our North Star, and it reflects a deep and abiding commitment to our nation, its people, and public service by our FEMA workforce.

There is no question that the field of emergency management has grown more challenging over the last decade. I saw it from the vantage point of my previous position as Commissioner of New York City Emergency Management – and I see it with crystal clarity from the vantage point of my current role. Emergency Managers – at every level of government – are being asked to do more, respond more, and solve more complex problems.

In 2010, there were 108 declared disasters for FEMA to support. Just 10 years later, that number increased to 315 -- including the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We can no longer speak of a “disaster season” – we now face intensified natural disasters throughout the year, often in places that are not used to experiencing them. Our mission has not changed, but our operating environment has. And with that, comes the challenge of ensuring that everyone who qualifies for FEMA assistance is able to access that help.

In December of 2021, we announced a strategic plan that has three crosscutting objectives to help us meet FEMA’s mission. Our first strategic goal is to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management, to ensure that all disaster survivors receive the assistance for which they qualify under the law. This requires recognizing that vulnerable individuals and communities in our country could have more difficulty accessing that assistance. As an agency, we must have a “people first” focus, and eliminate the barriers to individuals and communities accessing our programs.

For example, we took a hard look at our Individuals and Households Assistance program (IHP) and implemented several improvements through a people-first lens. In some rural areas of the country, homeowners have handed down their property to their heirs informally over generations, and there may not be recorded deeds to their homes. Under our previous policy, a flood survivor in Appalachia or a tornado survivor in Mississippi would have faced difficulty accessing FEMA assistance without formal proof of ownership. We changed our policy, and now accept alternative forms of documentation such as Department of Motor Vehicles registration and utility bills, while still taking steps to guard against potentially fraudulent claims. Since we implemented these changes in August 2021, FEMA has helped tens of thousands of homeowners and renters receive assistance they might have been denied under the old system simply because they lacked traditional documentation.

We also changed how we calculate the threshold for property losses to qualify for Direct Housing, which ensures more precise damage evaluations regardless of the size of the damaged home. The old rules disadvantaged homeowners with more modest homes, who might have suffered comparable damage to larger homes, but were receiving less assistance. The new

calculation methodology is more accurate in providing assistance that is proportionate to the damage sustained. Bottom line, our priority is to make sure all survivors get the assistance for which they qualify under the law.

Our second strategic goal is to enhance the nation's ability to anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to future climate conditions. FEMA is not just a response and recovery agency. Through close collaboration with federal, state, local, tribal, and territory governments, community-based organizations, and the private sector, FEMA is positioning itself as a true *resilience* agency. We must recognize the changing climate and ensure that we are prepared for the challenges it brings us and will continue to bring. What we do to prepare for all hazards is often as important as what we do after disaster strikes.

Congress' investment in mitigation programs to make our nation more resilient has been robust. We have seen this through your support of the development of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities or "BRIC" grant program in 2018, and through the appropriation of \$6.8 billion in funds to FEMA in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) in 2021. To date, for BRIC alone, the Administration has announced nearly \$4 billion in available funding to states, local communities, Tribal Nations, and territories to undertake hazard mitigation projects and reduce the risks they face from disasters and other natural hazards.

We also appreciate the strong bipartisan support for the Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation (STORM) Act Revolving Loan Fund, which authorizes FEMA to provide seed funding to states and tribes to establish hazard mitigation revolving loan funds. These revolving loan funds will give local governments another tool to finance projects to reduce their risks from natural hazards and disasters. In implementing these and other mitigation programs, we are working to eliminate the barriers that small, rural, and other communities with limited capacity face when seeking mitigation funding. By providing technical assistance, we are helping these communities better understand the requirements of the program and the application process.

Additionally, FEMA is implementing a national strategy to incentivize the adoption of disaster-resistant building codes to strengthen buildings against intensifying disaster impacts. For example, in Florida, buildings built to newer codes consistently fared better during Hurricane Ian than older buildings. Investments in hazard resistant building codes over the last 20 years have saved lives, reduced property losses, and been shown to save eleven dollars for every dollar invested.

Our third strategic goal is to promote and sustain a ready FEMA and a prepared nation. Between 2015 and 2021 alone, FEMA experienced a 165 percent increase in the number of staff who deployed to support disaster operations for more than 30 days, and an unprecedented 346 percent increase in the number of days FEMA personnel were deployed to disaster operations annually.

We are very grateful to Congress for passing the Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce (CREW) Act last fall. Our FEMA reservists are the vast majority of our disaster response workforce, and the CREW Act extends Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) protections to them, which will improve our recruitment and retention

efforts. I've been to many disasters since that bill was signed into law and I continually run into reservists who are already benefitting from this legislation.

We must also expand our approach to agency readiness and to national preparedness. To effectively manage disasters and administer recovery programs, we must first understand the environment in which we are working. With \$1.3 million appropriated by Congress for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, FEMA is creating a steady-state disaster response analytics division, which will help build our geospatial capabilities, improve our ability to characterize incidents, and conduct analysis that enables us to provide a more effective and efficient response.

FEMA is taking proactive steps to make sure we are well positioned to respond to the 2023 Atlantic Hurricane Season. We have made tremendous progress over the last few years in our ability to preposition resources to ensure we can work with our state, local, Tribal, and territorial partners quickly and effectively. For example, FEMA had nine times the amount of water, ten times the number of meals, eight times the number of tarps, and three times the number of generators staged on Puerto Rico ahead of the 2022 Atlantic Hurricane Season as compared to when Hurricane Maria hit the island in 2017. A more forward-leaning posture to support immediate critical needs after a disaster is a key progression towards a more ready FEMA and a more prepared nation.

Just as FEMA must be ready to respond to natural disasters through our preparedness efforts, we must equally be ready and equipped to respond when terrorist attacks occur. Last year, the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, experienced a horrific incident of targeted violence, which reminds us that threats to the homeland no longer occur only in high population areas. During my visit to Colleyville, I met with the Rabbi and the congregants and saw firsthand how this devastating event impacted not only the community but their individual lives as well. They also shared how the funding they received from the Nonprofit Security Grant Program greatly benefited their efforts to recover and to protect themselves from future attacks. In FY 2024, our budget request includes a \$55 million increase in the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. This vital grant supports local communities through target hardening, physical security enhancements, and other activities for nonprofit organizations that are at high risk of a terrorist or other extremist attack.

This subcommittee has oversight of this and other FEMA preparedness grant programs, and I look forward to discussing the suite of those grant programs with you today.

From my time as Commissioner of New York City Emergency Management, I understand – as you do – what disasters mean from the local stakeholder perspective. From my current position, I see the unwavering dedication of our FEMA workforce to supporting people across our nation before, during, and after disasters, facing what is, in many cases, the worst tragedy of people's lives. Our FEMA workforce demonstrates the very best of the United States of America, and I am committed to supporting the FEMA workforce in every way possible. I ask for continued support from each of you.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.