



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairwoman Val Demings (D-FL)

### *FEMA: Building a Workforce Prepared and Ready to Respond Part 2*

March 1 2022

Our hearing today is a continuation of a very important topic that the Subcommittee examined on January 20, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's workforce. I am pleased that FEMA Deputy Administrator Erik Hooks is joining our hearing this morning. As we all know, the most valuable resources of any organization are the men and women on the ground, executing the mission. FEMA's workforce works nonstop to help those in need, and I am so grateful for their dedication to the mission.

As a former law enforcement officer and a Member of Congress, I have personally seen the incredible work FEMA has done to support Floridians in the wake of disasters, like Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne in 2004 and Hurricane Irma in 2017.

In recent years, FEMA has faced unprecedented challenges and growing responsibilities that have taken a toll on the agency's workforce. FEMA has risen to the challenge of meeting an expanded mission scope—helping with everything from the resettlement of Afghan evacuees to responding to record-breaking natural disasters.

As the threat of climate change continues to grow, sadly, severe weather is becoming the new normal—a reality that will only further add stressors to FEMA's already-burdened workload.

The demands climate change puts on the FEMA workforce are unprecedented. The increase in disaster declarations in recent years reflects a significant increase in FEMA's workload. Compared to the 1960s when there were on average 18 disasters every year, we saw 104 major disaster declarations in 2020, and in 2021 there were 58 major disaster declarations.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 response continues to be a part of FEMA's workload. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that over half of FEMA's Public Assistance workforce has spent time working on the COVID-19 response from their primary duty station, meaning that fewer FEMA employees can focus on long-term recovery for existing projects.

Regularly, new challenges and threats arise, stressing the importance of FEMA's mission. For example, FEMA's workforce also plays a central role in ensuring our communities are protected from man-made threats through the administration of several grant programs, including the Nonprofit Security Grant Program.

The recent spate of bomb threats against Historically Black Colleges and Universities, along with other houses of worship, emphasize the importance of the Nonprofit Security Grant Program in guarding our communities against the terrorist attacks and the extent that we depend on the FEMA workforce to provide these critical resources.

Increased responsibilities and crises have led to challenges with recruitment, training, and retention. These workforce challenges have the potential to jeopardize FEMA's ability to meet this mission. In recent years, FEMA has taken important steps to grow its workforce. Between FY 2016 and FY2021, the FEMA workforce grew by almost 8,000 employees, a significant achievement. However, FEMA still has work to do in reaching its target staffing levels.

FEMA relies on reservist employees that are called upon to temporarily respond to disasters as they arise. However, given training constraints and the lack of employment protections and benefits for these employees, FEMA has struggled to maintain a strong reservist workforce.

FEMA has also taken steps to build a more inclusive and diverse workforce that better reflect the communities it serves. Similarly, FEMA committed to additional accountability initiatives to combat workplace harassment and discrimination.

I applaud Administrator Deanne Criswell's prioritization of the FEMA workforce within the 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan. Furthermore, under the Biden administration FEMA has emphasized a new focus on equity, central to which is ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce that represents the diversity of American communities that it seeks to serve.

On that note, I am very pleased to welcome FEMA Deputy Administrator Erik Hooks before the Committee today, and I look forward to hearing about FEMA's work to support its workplace and hear how Congress can best support the agency in its mission.

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