



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

FEMA: Building a Workforce Prepared and Ready to Respond

January 20, 2022

We are here to discuss the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce. This topic is incredibly timely, given the tornadoes that struck southwest Florida Sunday morning, destroying dozens of homes and leaving thousands without power in Lee and Charlotte Counties. I offer my deepest sympathies for the Floridians who were impacted and am committed to supporting their communities as they recover. I am grateful that FEMA is already on the ground, assisting with the damage assessments necessary for federal assistance.

Thank you, Chairman Correa and Ranking Member Meijer for joining Ranking Member Cammack and me for this important hearing. I want to begin today's hearing by thanking the FEMA workforce for the job they do every day. As an agency, they have worked nonstop to help those in need. I have witnessed FEMA come to the aid of hurting Floridians and I am tremendously grateful for their service. Over the years, FEMA has responded to disasters, including multiple, simultaneous large-scale disasters, and supported other Federal agencies with their missions. Notably, FEMA continues to carry out critical parts of the Federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

FEMA's workforce plays a crucial role in protecting our communities from terrorism through the administration of the Department of Homeland Security Preparedness Grants, which includes funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. Last weekend, the hostage situation in Colleyville, Texas reminded us of just how important these grant programs are in addressing terrorist attacks and how much we rely on the FEMA workforce to keep our communities safe.

The demand on FEMA's workforce is already immense, and it will only grow due to the frequency and intensity of natural disasters that are predicted to increase with climate change. To put things into perspective, the average number of major disaster declarations issued from 1960 to 1969 was roughly 18 per year. In contrast, in 2020, FEMA responded to a record 104 major disaster declarations and in 2021, FEMA responded to 58 major disaster declarations.

While FEMA has responded to disaster assistance missions over the years, an increasing workload has contributed to workforce challenges related to hiring, training, and retention. After the record-breaking 2017 hurricanes, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that FEMA faced challenges in training employees and maintaining staffing levels across four concurrent disasters, which hindered the agency's response. Furthermore, in 2020, more FEMA workers transferred to other agencies than in any other year over the past decade. This mass exit may be attributed to the workload; past employees have described working 12-hour days and not having enough time to recover between assignments. FEMA's workforce is suffering from an increase in burnout, and it is crucial that FEMA address these concerns and prioritize its workforce and their needs.

Additionally, I am worried about the agency's lack of diversity especially within its leadership roles. Only 24% of FEMA's Senior Executive Service employees identified as minorities and 31% identified as female. Having a diverse workforce is critical to providing equitable and comprehensive disaster assistance. I commend the Biden Administration for investing in FEMA's workforce and for releasing the 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan which establishes three overarching goals for the next five years: improving equity in emergency management, leading the field of climate resilience, and ensuring FEMA is ready to respond to the many tasks the Agency is assigned.

It is with sincere gratitude that I welcome our witnesses here today. I look forward to hearing your perspectives on FEMA's workforce and what Congress can do to better support them moving forward.

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