

Written Testimony  
*of*  
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*Before the*

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery  
and Subcommittee on Oversight, Management, and Accountability

*Hearing on:*

**“FEMA: Building a Workforce Prepared and Ready to Respond”**

*Date*

Thursday, January 20, 2022

Chair Val Demings, Ranking Member Kat Cammack, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about FEMA, Building a Workforce Prepared and Ready to Respond.

First, I want to celebrate the fact that FEMA’s workforce has continued to respond to COVID-19, as well as Hurricanes, Floods, Fires, and Severe Weather Outbreaks, while administering its authorized and appropriated funded programs from Congress. Much has been done through remote work which has allowed FEMA to continue its mission during this pandemic.

While others will talk about the challenges that FEMA faces in building and maintaining its workforce, I want to focus on possible solutions.

FEMA is authorized major three classifications of workforce:

FEMA Permanent Full Time (PFT) employees are hired through a competitive process that includes an application and interview. They

may gain competitive status after one year of continuous service and full career tenure after three years of continuous service.

Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE) - are hired to work for a specific, limited period, between two to four years. These positions may be renewed if there is ongoing disaster work and funding is available. CORE employees are generally eligible for the same benefits as PFT employees, but do not gain competitive status nor career tenure during their term.

Reservists (On-Call) FEMA consistently seeks talented and hard-working people who are eager to assist disaster survivors and first responders on an on-call basis as Reservist employees. They are the main FEMA workforce during an emergency or disaster.

While there are other classifications such as FEMA Corps, Internships, most of the workforce resides in the above three classifications.

Additionally, to augment the disaster workforce, the Department of Homeland Security maintains a Surge Capacity Force (SCF) and FEMA continues to recruit, roster, orient, and deploy SCF members as necessary.

Recommendations:

### **Better Utilization of the Permanent Full Time (PFT) Workforce in disaster response.**

- All PFT Workforce members should be trained in an emergency role in addition to their full-time role.
- PFT members should be allowed to deploy to disasters as part of a rotational system to ensure daily operational needs of FEMA are met.
- FEMA should continue to utilize the PFT as a surge workforce during major event.

## Background

Many of the PTF workforce join FEMA to help in disasters but are rarely deployed. Most disasters are managed by the CORE and Reservists workforce. But during major events like Hurricane Katrina, Super Storm Sandy, the Hurricanes of 2017, and most recently the Federal response to COVID-19, it was required that the PFT workforce deploy to support emergency operations. Ensuring the PFT workforce is prepared and trained to emergency operations is key to provide a rapid surge workforce. There are three main activities that the PFT workforce are expected to perform during these major events.

1. Deployed to the disaster to support emergency operations
2. Staff the National Response Coordination Center (RCC) or Regional RCCs
3. Backfill for deployed staff to continue continuing of operations for time sensitive functions.

My experience during Super Strom Sandy was that many of the those deployed for the first time came back with new appreciation for how their jobs supported the FEMA mission.

When I became FEMA Administrator in 2009, not every FEMA Permanent fulltime employee had emergency duties in their position descriptions even as this requirement was in the job postings. When I inquired about this, I was informed that not all employees were expected to be deployable in a disaster. We made a change that all new hires would complete a signing statement acknowledging that they would be expected to have an emergency function in addition to their full-time job. The current statement on U.S.A. Jobs is as follows

“EMERGENCY ASSIGNMENT: Every FEMA employee has regular and recurring emergency management responsibilities, though not every position requires routine deployment to disaster sites. All positions are subject to recall around the clock for emergency management

operations, which may require irregular work hours, work at locations other than the official duty station, and may include duties other than those specified in the employee's official position description. Travel requirements in support of emergency operations may be extensive in nature (weeks to months), with little advance notice, and may require employees to relocate to emergency sites with physically austere and operationally challenging conditions.”

The Disaster Staffing Support Program (DSSP) is comprised of FEMA HQ FTE staff who do not typically deploy.

This internal, surge workforce is made up of PFTs and COREs across the FEMA HQ who currently hold Ancillary Support, Unassigned, or Mission Essential designations.

### **Improve benefits and retention of the Reservist Workforce**

1. Provide all Reservist with a minimum of 2 days a month and two weeks a year of paid training if not deployed in that Fiscal Year for at least 30 days.
2. Consider adding the FEMA Reservist workforce to the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act or provide similar protections under the Stafford Act.
3. Continue to improve the implementation of Disaster Reform and Recovery Act (DRRA) where CORE and Reservists can compete for PFT positions at FEMA under Merit Promotion after 3 or more years of continuous work.

### **Background**

Reservist at FEMA a not the equivalent of the military reservist who are covered under the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act. Rather FEMA reservist are considered on-call who work intermittently with little benefits when not deployed. They have no protections if they have full time employment when called up.

Hiring and maintaining FEMA Reservists is a continuous process. As the work is on-call, and intermittent, attracting talent in tight job markets is a challenge. Without incentives to recruit and maintain Reservists, this workforce will continue to be a staffing challenge for current and future disasters.

### Hiring Under the Disaster Reform and Recovery Act (DRRA)

Before the Disaster Reform and Recovery Act, Stafford Act employees could only apply for Permanent Full-Time (PFT) positions open to the general public. Now, Stafford Act employees can compete for PFT positions at FEMA under Merit Promotion after 3 or more years of continuous work.

### **Reduce the workforce requirements to administer disaster assistance under the Stafford Act.**

1. Speed disaster recovery by using estimated cost rather than actual cost. Adapt Insurance Industry best practices to ensure fair payouts for eligible work in a declared disaster in months, not years.
2. Continue the Dispute Resolution Process (Arbitration) for all current and future disasters where agreement cannot be reached in recommendation 1.
3. Do not allow a mentality of zero fraud, waste, or abuse to drive process. Review how much it cost to administer one dollar in public assistance to see how this has driven up the cost, staffing requirements, and time it takes.

### Background

Current staffing plans are based on the current implementation of disaster assistance under those programs available under Stafford Act Disaster Declarations.

FEMA was given new tools un the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013 to include using estimates for public assistance projects rather than actual cost.

## **Continue support the FEMA Administrator's plans to address workplace harassment and discrimination.**

### Background

In the Spring of 2019, FEMA hired a third-party organization, RAND, to conduct an employee survey on workplace harassment and discrimination in response to an internal investigation that found disturbing evidence of misconduct within FEMA's senior leadership ranks. The survey focused on the timeframe of Spring 2018 through Spring 2019 and ultimately found numerous FEMA employees reported experiencing civil rights violations on the basis of sex, race, or ethnicity.

Female employees reported experiencing a less positive experience in the workplace than their male counterparts.

The report also identified that:

- Employees felt a gap in trust with agency senior leaders.
- Employees felt barriers to reporting civil rights violations existed.
- Employees who did report violations or misconduct felt they experienced retaliation.
- There is a lack of understanding of what constitutes sexual misconduct and appropriate behaviors.
- Employees expressed feelings of isolation and heightened levels of vulnerability.
- There is a perception that perpetrators are not held accountable.
- Employees found there is inconsistency in conduct expectations.

FEMA provided this below information as they continue to improve the Agency's work climate and engagements to help implement those changes

- Conducted Listening Sessions for FEMA Staff to share concerns on RAND report findings and next steps.
- Developed central ‘landing page’ on the FEMA Intranet to serve as a one-stop shop for employee resources regarding culture improvement.
- Developed and implemented Standards of Conduct for all employees.
- Addressed Agency culture during new employee onboarding regarding FEMA’s core values and our commitment to a workplace free of harassment and discrimination. In addition, the Agency is updating the exit interview process to better identify issues raised by employees moving on to different opportunities.
- Required anti-harassment training for all employees.
- Reporting disciplinary actions in the FEMA Weekly for agency-wide situational awareness.

Field Operations Training: FEMA is partnering with RAINN (Rape Abuse Incest National Network), the largest anti-sexual assault organization in the country.

- Since early 2020, RAINN initiative trainings have occurred at 14 Joint Field Offices (JFOs) with a total of 2000 participants and will include additional JFOs going forward.
- FEMA’s goals, through the RAINN trainings are to:
  - Raise awareness of sexual misconduct within selected JFOs.
  - Provide JFO staff with tools to better prevent and respond to sexual misconduct.
  - Align community members within selected JFOs on next steps towards safer environments.
  - Create a culture of accountability and preparedness when it comes to sexual misconduct.
  - Execute a proactive approach to addressing sexual misconduct.
  - Implement sustainable change across the organization.
- Through March 2022, future trainings will occur at 6 additional JFOs and all trainings will be held virtually in FY 2021, with

tentative options to deliver trainings in-person in FY 2022 pending  
COVID-19 restrictions