

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

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

Submitted
By
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Chair Demings, Ranking Member Cammack, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss FEMA's ongoing efforts to bolster our nation's emergency management workforce and describe how the agency's new Strategic Plan guides this priority.

FEMA's mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters has never been more critical. The field of emergency management is at a pivotal moment due to the tremendous change in our nation's risk landscape. Disasters are becoming more frequent, severe, and complex, and the demands placed upon the emergency management community are increasing exponentially. In the last two years alone, FEMA has faced historic natural disasters, a nationwide COVID-19 pandemic, and other challenging missions. Our workforce of nearly 22,000 emergency managers does exceptional work every day, and ensuring their continued readiness and well-being is a priority for Administrator Criswell and for me.

Under the leadership of Administrator Criswell, FEMA released our new Strategic Plan in December of 2021. The guiding principles and priorities align with President Biden's vision to improve equitable outcomes for those we serve; increase our nation's resilience to climate change; and promote a ready and diverse workforce. The Strategic Plan serves as the roadmap for the agency over the next five years. Its three crosscutting goals are to (1) instill equity as a foundation of emergency management; (2) lead whole of community in climate resilience, and (3) promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation. In today's testimony, I will describe FEMA's ongoing efforts to bolster both our workforce and the broader emergency management community within the context of these three strategic goals.

Our first strategic goal is to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management. We know disasters, both natural and otherwise, impact people and communities differently, based on geography, demographics, and historical and cultural characteristics. These unique contexts require tailored solutions designed to meet their unique needs. Underserved communities often suffer disproportionately from disasters and resulting impacts can worsen inequities already present in society. This cycle compounds the challenges faced by these communities, making it difficult to recover from both current and future disasters. By instilling equity as a foundation of emergency management and striving to meet the unique needs of underserved communities, we can work to break this cycle and build a more resilient nation.

FEMA is committed to ensuring our employees increasingly reflect the diversity of the nation. The agency will continue to build an inclusive workforce which represents the many identities, races, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, ages, cultures, and beliefs of the people we serve. In alignment with our Strategic Plan, FEMA is working to recruit individuals from underrepresented communities including through partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium of Tribal Colleges and Universities to create hiring pipelines into the field of emergency management. The agency will also continue to invest in professional development for all FEMA employees to foster an environment in which individuals feel safe, valued, and empowered.

Our second strategic goal is to lead whole of community in climate resilience. Administrator Criswell has called climate change "the crisis of our generation." Due to climate change, natural disasters are more frequent, more intense, and more destructive. In 2020 alone, there were a

record 22 weather and climate-related disaster events across the United States whose losses exceeded one-billion-dollars. 2021 was a close second, with 20 weather and climate-related disasters exceeding one-billion-dollars in losses. The growing severity of these events increases the time it takes for communities to recover, and this process can be further complicated by repeated disasters in areas already struggling to bounce back from past events. These cascading and compounding impacts pose the greatest risk to our communal and nationwide resilience. I would like to thank Congress for working with the Biden-Harris Administration to provide FEMA with additional resources to mitigate the impact of climate change by passing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The significant funding made available by this legislation for grants to establish revolving loan funds and FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grants will provide our state, local, territorial, and tribal nation partners with greater financial support for projects which invest in a more resilient nation, reduce disaster suffering, and lessen future disaster costs. These investments will only grow in importance as climate change continues to alter the landscape of risk facing emergency managers across the country. Additionally, FEMA is working to make sure the agency's workforce is well-equipped to advise our partners on the best ways to build climate resilient communities.

These challenges require that FEMA build a foundational understanding of climate science, the impacts of climate change, and effective climate adaptation strategies. FEMA will grow a climate-literate workforce through integration of climate science into policy, programs, partnerships, field operations, and training. In 2022, Administrator Criswell is directing a new collaborative steering group comprised of leadership from FEMA's program offices to begin a multi-year initiative that incorporates climate literacy into relevant training, planning, grant eligibility, and exercises. FEMA program offices and the US Fire Administration will further collaborate to strengthen the capability of state, local, territorial, and tribal nation partners to advance these critical issues within their pre- and post-disaster work.

Our third strategic goal is to promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation. The 2017 hurricane and wildfire seasons marked a change in disaster operations tempo. Compared to 2016, for the past four years, FEMA has had more than twice as many staff deployed every day of the year. By November of 2020, FEMA was managing six times as many disasters, and responses to fire incidents were up 120% across the nation. This increase in frequency, severity, and complexity has heightened demands on FEMA's workforce and on those across the larger emergency management community.

To adapt to the trend, FEMA must expand its approach to agency readiness and to national preparedness. This expansion necessitates an increase in the nation's overall emergency management capabilities at all levels of government, as well as the private and nonprofit sectors, and among individuals, households, and families.

Emergency management is a shared responsibility. We need to continue to bolster the field of emergency management across the country by better defining what it means to be an emergency manager and building standardized career paths for the nation's emergency management workforce. FEMA's educational institutions will lead the effort to advance the emergency management profession by supporting curricula for comprehensive emergency management training, education, and professional development for our partners across the nation.

Through FEMA's training programs including the Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP), the agency is working to make training available to emergency managers anywhere they are, at any time in their careers. FEMA is modernizing their operational design so the nation's federal, state, local, territorial, tribal nation, non-governmental organization, and private sector emergency managers can meet the risks posed by increasing hazards, and obtain the training required to become certified within the National Qualification System.

Internally, FEMA is also taking steps to improve our ability to meet the increasing number of current and emergent threats requiring federal support. As FEMA is increasingly engaged in complex missions beyond typical Stafford Act emergencies and disasters, the agency must envision, plan, and prepare for incidents that do not fall into common disaster categories. FEMA must be able to quickly assess, adapt, and surge. This effort includes bolstering capacity in the agency's incident management and incident support workforce, continuity communications, and logistics.

As FEMA's incident management and incident support workforce continues to grow, we will also prioritize the growth of the professional workforce which enables them. Our readiness must include having the necessary specialists who can support the agency's disaster workforce, such as the procurement specialists needed to execute the contracts and mission assignments which allows the government to mobilize assistance; the professionals who facilitate data and information sharing within FEMA's IT infrastructure; those who ensure civil rights are protected in all activities; and the specialists necessary to train the workforce, manage operations, and focus on employee wellness.

As we implement the 2022-2026 Strategic Plan and prepare for what lies ahead, our workforce has never been more experienced or tested. Since joining the agency in December of 2021, I have been impressed by their adaptability, dedication, and hard work. However, Administrator Criswell and I recognize that much has been asked of them, and we are committed to supporting the FEMA workforce in every way possible going forward. I ask for that same support from each of you.

As I look back on my time leading the Office of Public Safety in North Carolina, I understand – like many of you – what readiness looks like from the state and local perspective. No less is asked of our federal responders. The commitment demanded by our profession is not small. FEMA personnel meet people on what is likely one of the worst days of their lives. They support, they help, and along the way they demonstrate the very best of America.

I look forward to all we will accomplish together as we continue to build a more ready and resilient nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.