



One Hundred Fourteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515

May 23, 2016

Ms. Gail McGovern
President and Chief Executive Officer
American Red Cross
2025 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Ms. McGovern,

I write to express my concerns about the ongoing challenges the American Red Cross (ARC) continues to experience in performing its core disaster response mission. As Ranking Member of the House Committee on Homeland Security, I have spent well over a decade trying to work with ARC to address the issues that led to its inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina, and I am troubled that despite these efforts, many of the same problems persist in my home State of Mississippi.

Ten years ago, I identified a series of failings that undermined ARC's response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly related to problems with ARC's staffing and inadequate community outreach. Since then, I have worked hard to help ARC address its shortcomings. For example, I have encouraged ARC to address challenges delivering relief services to rural and diverse populations by diversifying its hiring practices so that the organization – from top management to boots on the ground – reflect the communities they serve. Indeed, I have written to ARC at least eight times.¹ I also wrote to ARC – on at least two occasions – to express my concern about changes to its staffing model that I believed could negatively affect its ability to execute disaster response activities.²

Although well over a decade has passed since ARC's botched response to Hurricane Katrina, similar planning, coordination, and training problems continue. Last week, *ProPublica* reported that ARC's response to the recent floods in Mississippi was hampered by poor communication and coordination with local emergency managers, an “inability to develop tactical plans for their relief operations,”

¹ Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Jan. 22, 2016); Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Nov. 13, 2014); Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Mar. 28, 2014); Letter from Chairman Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Nov. 10, 2010); Letter from Chairman Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Nov. 9, 2009); Letter from Chairman Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (April 11, 2008); Letter from Chairman Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Bonnie McElveen-Hunter (Jan. 4, 2008); Letter from Chairman Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Bonnie McElveen-Hunter (Dec. 7, 2007); and Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Mr. John F. McGuire (Apr. 5, 2007).

² Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Dec. 23, 2015); and Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (July 15, 2013).

and by cutbacks and high turn-over among State staff.³ Ultimately, volunteers attempted to distribute relief supplies in unaffected areas and State officials reported supply shortages.⁴ Mississippi officials also complained of additional challenges ranging from ARC's inability to effectively coordinate with local officials regarding the location of shelters to security at relief sites.⁵ Accordingly, one emergency manager described ARC's response as "marginal at best."⁶

None of these problems were unforeseeable. Even though Hurricane Katrina taught Federal, State, local, and non-governmental responders important lessons, ARC's struggle to fully internalize those lessons remains a constant source of frustration for the communities it serves. As someone who has continually tried to work with ARC to address internal staffing and diversity challenges that have undermined its disaster response performance, I am concerned some of the problems appear to be getting worse. For example, ARC's re-engineering plan and staffing cuts – which I have addressed with you in previous correspondence⁷ – appear to have made ARC less able to coordinate its activities with local emergency managers, less aware of how disasters have affected a community, and less able to deliver relief services. That is unacceptable. It is time to turn lessons observed into lessons learned.

Moving forward, I would like to know how ARC will address the concerns raised by emergency managers in Mississippi. Accordingly, pursuant to Rule X and Rule XI of the House of Representatives, please respond to the following questions by June 13, 2016:

- *ProPublica* indicated that ARC closed several chapters in Mississippi since 2008. How many Mississippi ARC chapters existed in 2008 and how many Mississippi ARC chapters exist today?
- *ProPublica's* report indicated that staffing cut backs and high turn-over hindered ARC's response to the recent flooding in Mississippi. Please provide ARC's Mississippi staffing levels in 2008 and today, including position titles and where the employees are based.
- *ProPublica* identified lingering communications challenges as a factor undermining ARC's ability to carry out its disaster relief mission in Mississippi. What is your plan to improve communication and coordination between ARC staff and emergency managers in Mississippi?

I do not question the important role ARC plays in helping communities respond to a disaster, nor do I question the passion and dedication of the thousands of local ARC volunteers spread across the country. That is why I was disturbed when ARC dismissed as "hyperbole" the complaints about its performance during the Mississippi flooding response.⁸ I recognize that ARC has a unique responsibility - and underdeveloped potential – to carry out effective, well-coordinated disaster response activities, and I am committed to helping ARC address the problems that continue to

³ Sarah Smith, "After Mississippi Flooding, Mississippi Stumbles Again," *ProPublica* (May 19, 2016), <https://www.propublica.org/article/after-mississippi-flooding-red-cross-stumbles-again>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Letter from Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson to Ms. Gail McGovern (Dec. 23, 2015).

⁸ *Id.*

undermine its response efforts. The time has come to chart a new course and address head on the challenges that have historically plagued the organization.

I appreciate your attention to this issue. If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Hope Goins, Chief Counsel for Oversight, at (202) 226-2616.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bennie G. Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member