

Martin Senterfitt

Emergency Management Director

Monroe County, Florida

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Committee on Homeland Security

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery

“Improving the Federal Response: Perspectives on the State of Emergency Management”

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Payne, Ranking Member King, and members of this Subcommittee for holding this hearing today. I am Martin Senterfitt, the Director of Emergency Management for Monroe County, Florida- the Florida Keys. I am pleased to be here to address coordination issues between FEMA and County Emergency Management programs and to offer a solution to improve our future interactions.

As we examine these issues and concerns I want to first recognize the incredible work being done within FEMA. I could spend hours recounting positive stories of FEMA successes and the incredible dedication and hard work of its employees, but I recognize today’s discussion is focused on improvement and my time is limited, therefore I will move forward and speak on an issue I feel is important; the relationship dynamics between FEMA and local emergency management.

A major role of FEMA is to expedite funding to disaster impact areas. We all recognize the necessity of fiscal oversight to prevent waste and fraud. Unfortunately, this oversight occurs months or years after the disaster by persons sitting in an office. These individuals have limited context as to the environment in which the decisions were made or the extenuating circumstances that may have existed. Because of this lack of awareness, these individuals may then make subjective decisions to deny reimbursements which then begins a chain reaction of appeals and delays, legal fees and stress.

Fortunately, in many of these circumstances, the two parties are often able to work to a positive solution as higher level executives are engaged who have the authority to use discretion and common sense and make case by case rulings. Unfortunately, this means reimbursement is delayed months or years and the impacted County is forced to pay interest on loans and face fiscal challenges while it is recovering from a disaster.

Recognizing the need for oversight, I suggest we engage a solution that is already right in front of us. FEMA often inserts a FEMA representative into the local Emergency Operations Center (EOC), who ride out the storm with us and then reports situational awareness updates to the FEMA structure. Unfortunately, this person is often limited by FEMA process and policy as to what they can say or suggest. They observe but do not actively participate.

In my opinion, after watching many FEMA employees interact in disaster environments, ground level FEMA employees are not allowed to give suggestions or in any way commit FEMA to action. This is perhaps due to a hyper-sensitivity to liability or fear of over committing. Most issues must be pushed up the chain and then wait for a decision or answer. But let me emphasize, these FEMA employees are highly competent and capable of providing local communities' priceless advice and input, but it appears they are limited by organizational culture and policies and a top down management structure.

Imagine a different scenario...

FEMA inserts a highly trained employee into the local EOC that partners with the County Emergency Manager and provides advice, input, and a second set of eyes to evaluate the decisions being made. Fiscal oversight can occur real time, during the event, and the FEMA representative will have full awareness of the environment in which the decisions are being made. Let me emphasize, potential mistakes can be prevented instead of appealed. Once concurrence is reached, both parties can sign off and our first level of oversight is complete. A state employee can also be added to this process which will allow concurrence at the local, state, and federal level. This solution provides a sounding board for the local emergency manager and should provide enough oversight to expedite the reimbursement process.

In my EOC I require that all local agencies to provide individuals who have the authority to act on their Agencies behalf. That is what makes an EOC effective. I want the same level of commitment from FEMA.

If we implement this change I will have a FEMA partner in my EOC, not an FEMA observer, and mistakes can be avoided, not disputed years later.

I thank you for your time and look forward to answering any questions you may have.