

Testimony of
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“Supporting Underserved Communities in Emergency Management”

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Chairwomen Demings, Ranking Member Cammack, and Members of the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this highly significant topic of supporting underserved communities in emergency management. My name is Antoine Richards, and I serve as Chief of Staff of the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management (I-DIEM). I-DIEM has been a strong advocate for vulnerable, underserved, and marginalized populations having previously testified before Congress on topics including “Experiences of Vulnerable Populations During Disasters,” “Ensuring Equity in FEMA’s Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery,” and “Health Disparities and the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic.” Our work is dedicated to the empowerment of marginalized communities within all phases of the disaster management cycle to promote a more resilient and sustainable future.

Whether hosting Virtual Equity Roundtables with communities from Alaska to Miami, deploying Equity Response Teams following Hurricane Ida and the Midwest tornadoes, or working directly with communities and tribal nations in the Mississippi Delta and coastal Louisiana, the experiences of our communities remain the same. Our most underserved communities’ express stories of exclusion, lack of access and awareness to funding, lack of understanding of complex administrative, bureaucratic processes, and an overall lack of support from federal, state, and/or local government. While progress is being made toward the integration of equity in strategic priorities, measures and initiatives, the structural processes that have created inequity remain the same.

The nation’s most vulnerable, underserved, and marginalized communities have been pushed to the outskirts of our nation and the wallows of urban civilization establishing a tone for discrimination whether by age, income, race or ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender, culture, and geographic location. Each of these factors create the culture of our communities and the fabric of our society while also serving as the foundation that defines underserved communities

and outlines inequities within each subpopulation. Elderly, low-income, BIPOC, individuals with access and functional needs, LGBTQIA+, women, children, and rural communities are experiencing decreased quality of life and access due to policy, programs, and practices which will inevitably be exacerbated by the current climate crisis.

From 1980 – present, the United States has sustained 332 weather and climate related disasters where overall damages/costs reached or exceeded \$1B for a total cost of \$2.275T. By decade, we averaged 5.5-billion-dollar events per year in the 1990s, 6.7 in the 2000s, 12.8 in the 2010s, 17.8 per year in the last five years, 18.7 in the last three years, and last year ranked second in the total number of billion-dollar events from this time frame. Currently, the US has experience nine (9) separate billion-dollar disasters from January – June without reaching peak hurricane season placing us on par for another record year in terms of extreme weather events and costs¹.

The steady increase in frequency and strength of disasters during our current climate crisis contributes to a decrease in adequate recovery and resilience among our communities. There is inadequate time to effectively recover before experiencing the next major disaster. Moreover, we often hear stories from our communities that resources for response and recovery often do not reach underserved communities while research consistently shows that poverty rate and higher proportions of racial and ethnic populations typically receive less funding support for mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery². This is further exacerbated for communities with pre-existing vulnerabilities which suffer from the complexities of meeting basic daily needs. Moreover, the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to spotlight disparities among our most marginalized communities as cases surge to approximately 100,000 new cases daily among reported cases³ and the burden of the virus on people of color, low-income, and other structurally disadvantaged populations remain prevalent⁴.

Taking into account both climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 100 million people are expected to be pushed into poverty globally by 2030⁵. For the US, there is a projected increase in poverty levels approximately 30% over the next ten (10) years while climate change will exacerbate negative poverty trends within our communities. This indicates a shift where the projected costs will continue to rise under our current system and communities will continue to suffer unless we effectively adapt our approach to emergency management to better understand and support underserved communities.

In recent reports from the State Resilience Partnership, findings reveal that 84% of state flood plans do not, or only minimally, consider how flooding will disproportionately affect vulnerable

¹ [Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters | National Centers for Environmental Information \(NCEI\) \(noaa.gov\)](#)

² Sullivan, P., Sutley, E., Wu, Y., Lyles, L.W. (2022). Who gets federal financial resources to mitigate and recover from disasters? National Hazards Workshop [Virtual Poster Presentation].

³ Sullivan, P. (2022). COVID-19 cases are on the rise. Does it matter anymore? *The Hill*. [COVID-19 cases are on the rise. Does it matter anymore? \(yahoo.com\)](#)

⁴ Wasfy, J.H., Hidrue, M.K., Rockett, H., Caffero-Fonseca, E.T., Ferris, T.G., del Carmen, M.G. (2021). Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of both inpatients and outpatients with positive testing for SARS-CoV-2. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 36, 2522-2524.

⁵ Mahler, D.G., Lakner, C., Aguilar, R.A.C., Wu, H. (2020). Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty. *The World Bank*. [Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty \(worldbank.org\)](#)

communities. While 82% of state flood plans identify counties as responsible for implementation at the community level, only 39% of plans include specific strategies to assist low-capacity communities. Moreover, public engagement efforts were often associated with new and experimental initiatives that connect state-level strategy to local communities that engage directly with local communities however most state flood planning efforts involved little to no public outreach⁶. Subsequently, the whole community approach continues to exclude the whole community contributing to negative impacts which the Institute has witnessed firsthand through our on-the-ground efforts. Our approaches must improve upon our understanding of underserved populations to influence effective strategy and change.

For example, 26% of tribal nations are currently living below poverty level⁷ while 66% of tribes have no community disaster plans or family resources. Moreover, through our work with tribal nations in coastal Louisiana, we understand that tribal nations without federal and/or state recognition have decreased access to funding and. Reliance on federal, state, and local governments to ensure the safety and support of these nations, as US citizens, has only increased the negative impacts of disasters nationally. Moreover, while policy and programs are often strongly rooted data, research and engagement among tribal nations is often limited creating a barrier to substantial, necessary change. Challenges of tribal nations are also greatly impacted by limited access and resources within rural communities. Compared to urban areas, access to resources for rural communities are often complex and vulnerable people in rural populations are at increased risk to disasters as result.

Bearing the burden of chronic disease, COVID-19, and poverty due to access issues (i.e., access to healthy food, access to affordable healthcare, and underinsured or uninsured individuals and families), low-income communities and communities of color face additional barriers related to environmental justice and disasters. From an environmental perspective, Black and Latino communities are often situated in high-hazard locations and breathe 56% and 63% more pollution than they produce, respectively⁸. From an emergency management perspective, communities with higher poverty rates and higher proportions of Black residents often receive less funding in Hazard Mitigation Assistance and Individual Assistance. Additionally, counties with higher percentages of minority residents typically receive less funding than the value of damage assessed by FEMA during inspection². This aligns with a longstanding focus on widening racial wealth gaps as a result of disasters which highlighted higher accumulated wealth after disaster among white communities opposed to communities of color⁹. In addition, for communities where English is a second language (ESOL), language barriers contribute to inequitable access to communication and resources as well as effective community engagement strategies while cultural familial structures

⁶ State Resilience Partnership (2022). State flood planning landscape. *Planning*. [Planning – State Resilience Partnership](#)

⁷ Krogstad, J.M. (2014). One-in-four native americans and Alaska natives are living in poverty. *Pew Research Trust*. [One-in-four Native Americans and Alaska Natives are living in poverty | Pew Research Center](#)

⁸ Tessum, C.W., Apte, J.S., Goodkind, A.L. (2019). Inequity in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure. *Social Sciences*, 116(13), 6001-6006.

⁹ Howell, J. (2018). Natural disasters widen racial wealth gap. *Social Problems*. [Natural disasters widen racial wealth gap | EurekAlert!](#)

contribute to common disparities indicative of communities of color. It is these same familial structures that are affected by gender inequities that find women and children 14x more likely to than men to die during a disaster often as a result of gender and cultural norms present in our society¹⁰.

Individually, inequities rooted in these social determinants are impactful; however, with underserved communities, it is worth looking beyond individual contexts and exploring the intersections of each variable and how they influence outcomes among underserved communities creating compounding vulnerability. For example, the intersection of gender and income shows that vulnerability increases among women in lower socioeconomic groups¹¹. This is further impacted by intersections of gender, income, and race/ethnicity contributing to multiple inherited disparities as a result of our current system. It is our policies, programs, and practices that are contributory to these outcomes and our strategies require us to be culturally competent, intentional, and actionable to address underlying impacts at their core, through policy and legislation. We can no longer afford to seek temporary programs and initiatives that address issues without substantial change to the policies and practices that have created these inequities.

Future approaches require us to invest within our communities and put our communities at the forefront of our work as emergency managers and public servants. Supporting underserved communities in emergency management requires us to focus beyond a broken system and find new approaches for emergency management that focus on community investment, community revitalization, and community engagement. Our policies should be people-centric and focused on what can be achieved within the context of our current structure and where we can improve upon structurally to eliminate inequities. To highlight opportunities for emergency management to more strongly support underserved communities, I-DIEM offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- **Incorporate policy to integrate community-based support in federal funding strategies:**
Funding, including federal assistance grants, programs, and contracts, must incorporate policies and procedures that support communities. Funding strategies should be developed that allocates funding directly to communities. These approaches can include percent-based community allocation initiatives, subcontracting initiatives for local businesses and contractors, and requirements for community-based participatory approaches for funding receipt.
- **Funding for nonprofit and community-based organizations:** Initiatives should be developed that support direct funding for on-the-ground organizations, nonprofits, and community-based organizations that work directly with the communities on mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience.

¹⁰ International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN] (n.d.). Disaster and gender statistics. [Microsoft Word - Disaster and Gender Statistics.doc \(unisdr.org\)](#)

¹¹ Center for Disaster Philanthropy [CDP] (2022). Women and girls in disaster. *CDP*. [Women and Girls in Disasters - Center for Disaster Philanthropy](#)

- **Sustainability measures for equity initiatives:** Key best practices and appointment advisors should be indoctrinated into current policies to ensure sustainability of equity and community-support measures.
- **Prioritized funding streams and accountability:** Incorporation of policies and procedures that prioritize community funding streams and holds state and local governments accountable for ensuring that funding matches target communities.
- **Improved vulnerability assessments and community profiles:** Expand research to include key data on demographics and community profiles allowing all funding support and initiatives to align with target communities and holding all funders accountable for ensuring equity in transaction.
- **Incorporate training for emergency management workforce on cultural competency and trauma-informed community engagement strategies:** Incorporate training on cultural competency and trauma-informed community engagement to improve relationships between underserved communities and government.
- **Promote efforts to increase diversity within the field of emergency management:** This should include an analysis of the emergency management profession in comparison to the greater community with the understanding that lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion promotes inequitable emergency management policies and programs on federal, state, and local levels and within the private and nonprofit sectors.
- **Expand and sustain whole community approaches:** Identify, develop, and implement initiatives within the whole community approach to advocate expansion of whole community support initiatives with a prioritization for vulnerable, underserved, and marginalized communities.
- **Improved pre-planning for community dynamic needs:** Improve pre-planning requirements for community-based mitigation and preparedness that incorporates community profiles, target areas and tailored approaches to sustainability.
- **Take action via legislation and budget authority** including FEMA and other federal agencies with disaster response and recovery responsibilities to integrate equity into programs and policies.

Closing Remarks

Supporting underserved communities is the responsibility of government and an inherited right of US citizens across the nation. It is imperative that we focus on new ways to practice emergency management that are ground-up, and community-driven providing the necessary support and investment into communities. Through this approach, underserved communities are empowered to become stewards of their own resilience and maintain the necessary engagement mechanisms to facilitate impactful change with the support of government. As an organization, we applaud Congressman Thompson and the House of Representatives for the introduction and passing of the FEMA Equity Act which supports FEMA in its efforts at instilling equity as a foundation of emergency management. Further, we recognize the current Administrator's efforts to instill equity as a priority in FEMA policies, programs, and procedures. These actions represent a key example of how we, as policymakers and emergency managers, can do disasters differently. They represent a focus on humanity and the empowerment of our communities. As the leader in disaster equity,



I-DIEM recognizes that there is still work to be done, but a coordinated approach yields substantial impacts for our nation’s most underserved communities. As disasters continue to exacerbate disproportionate burdens, equity focused policy and approaches are the cornerstone of a more resilient future.