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FEMA Reauthorization: Recovering Quicker and Smarter

Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Carson, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic concerning recovering quicker and smarter from disaster.

I am Gayland Kitch, Director of Emergency Management for the City of Moore, Oklahoma. I have served my City for nearly 30 years, and in this position for 22 years. I am also a member of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA) and am providing this statement on their behalf.

IAEM-USA is our nation's largest association of emergency management professionals, with 5,000 members including emergency managers at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector. Most of our members are U.S. city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks.

We deeply appreciate the continuing support this Subcommittee has provided to the emergency management community, particularly your strong support for the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG), the Emergency Management Institute (EMI), for strengthening FEMA, and streamlining disaster assistance.

My community of Moore has approximately 56,000 residents within our 25 square miles in central Oklahoma. We're surrounded by Oklahoma City on three sides and the City of Norman to our south. Within the past 15 years we have experienced four major tornado events and six severe winter storms. We are now four months past our last major tornado that occurred on May 20th, 2013, and are well down the road to recovery.

As noted above, my community has a history with tornadoes. After a brush with an F-2 in October 1998, an F-5 tore a path of destruction through the northwest part of our City seven months later on May 3, 1999. The highest winds ever recorded – 316 miles per hour – were measured with this storm. After rebuilding more than 800 homes and numerous businesses, we were struck by an F-4 on May 8, 2003, again causing hundreds of homes and businesses to be damaged or destroyed. An EF-4 tornado formed over our City three years ago on May 10th, 2010; fortunately most of the damage in Moore was to rooftops, fences, and trees. And just eleven days after our devastating tornado this year, we were again struck by waves of severe winds and small tornadoes during rush hour on the evening of Friday, May 31st.

The Events of Monday, May 20, 2013

The potential for severe weather in our area was forecast well in advance. In fact, the Norman Office of the National Weather Service began discussing the possibility for severe weather as early as Friday, May 17th. On Saturday, the weather elements began to converge and on Sunday there was severe weather in our area, including a tornado that struck eastern Norman and western Shawnee, Oklahoma. Two persons lost their lives as this storm passed over their home near Shawnee.

As we began our day on Monday the 20th, you could tell there was a hint of storms in the air as well as in our official weather forecast. We suspected the severe weather would develop just to our west, and that convective initiation would begin earlier in the day than is usual for our area. As soon as the work day started, we were making sure that our key leaders were informed of the situation, inspecting our various alerting and response systems, and checking in with key partners.

At 10:00 a.m. the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Norman, Oklahoma conducted a briefing by Internet for public safety officials within their county warning area. During the

briefing, the forecasters discussed the likelihood and potential timing of severe weather. After the briefing, the Norman office of the NWS distributed further information about the impending severe weather by various means – the Internet, Twitter®, and Facebook®. In turn, my office used similar electronic means to further distribute this information to the public. In addition, I specifically made sure that our local school district was aware of the potential for severe weather as well as the possible timing of the event – prior to the regular release of school for the day. At 1:11 p.m., our Superintendent of Schools issued information to the district staff cancelling all evening activities, but indicating that the school would stand by its regular time for dismissal. Her final comment in that memo was, "...keep calm and carry on."

A tornado watch for our area was issued by the National Storm Prediction Center at 1:10 p.m. on Monday. Shortly thereafter and as building storms were just beginning to show on the radar we activated our local volunteer storm spotters and sent them into the field to observe the impending weather. At 2:12 p.m., the first weather warning was issued for a severe thunderstorm. Finally, a tornado warning was issued at 2:40 p.m. that included northern Cleveland County and the City of Moore.

Following actions outlined in our City's Emergency Operations Plan and our Severe Weather Operations Guide, we at that time activated all of our 36 outdoor warning devices (tornado sirens) to warn the public at large. We also distributed the warning by electronic and social networking means. In addition, the warning was broadcast by NOAA's All-Hazards Radio and our Oklahoma City area radio and television stations. Our severe weather planning is reviewed annually prior to the start of storm season, and the response executed generally six to ten times per year.

The tornado warning was reissued by the National Weather Service at 3:01 p.m. with the heightened wording of, "tornado emergency."

The situational awareness in our small Emergency Operations Center included watching the tornado live on feeds from all three of our television stations. Our local media had helicopters, experienced storms chasers and news crews out following the storm, and from their live "wall-to-wall" coverage and the reports of our own spotters we could literally track the progress of the tornado.

At 3:17 p.m., telemetry from several of our outdoor warning devices showed that they had lost commercial electrical power, giving us an indication that the tornado had actually entered our city limits at that time. Since roughly two-thirds of our warning devices operate from battery power, we were still able to continue alerting those within our City.

We could see visually that the tornado was both large and violent as it ruthlessly approached. The National Weather Service later determined the tornado was approximately ½ mile wide on

the ground and causing EF-5 damage beginning almost literally at my city limits. The tornado destroyed Briarwood Elementary School to our immediate west, and then Plaza Towers Elementary School – the site where 7 young students tragically lost their lives. Other persons were killed or injured in homes near the school. The tornado continued in an east-northeast direction across the southern end of our city's largest cemetery, and crossed through the heart of Little River Park. It returned into residential neighborhoods and neared Interstate 35 in the center of our community. As it approached the highway, it destroyed several businesses, including a convenience store where 3 more people lost their lives.

The tornado struck and destroyed the Moore Medical Center - our local hospital - but due largely to advance planning, exercising and warning no one was injured or killed. Nearby, our United States Post Office was struck, as well as a credit union where employees took shelter in the vault and survived. It narrowly missed a large movie theatre complex and then moved east into additional residential areas.

Before the tornado completed its path of destruction it damaged one of our city's clear well water storage and pumping stations, taking it off-line until emergency repairs could be made the next day. This became a key challenge when the tornado later severed power to Oklahoma City's Lake Draper water plant. These two facilities provide much of the water for Moore, and our water situation was critical for the first day or two after the tornado.

The Moore Public Schools is the third largest school district in the State of Oklahoma, with 32 educational campuses in Moore and south Oklahoma City serving over 21,000 students. As the tornado moved through the east side of Moore, it struck Highland East Junior High School, damaging the main school building and destroying the gymnasium/choir building. In total, our school district had two elementary schools and the district information technology center destroyed, and one junior high school and the district administration building heavily damaged.

Two of our 36 outdoor warning devices were destroyed outright by the tornado, with two more damaged beyond repair. Several other sirens received damage to their electrical components due to the power issues caused by this storm and another that followed on Friday, May 31st.

By current count, 1,323 homes within Moore sustained major damage or were destroyed in the May 20th tornado. An additional 445 homes received minor damage and 369 were affected. About 39 commercial structures housing 50 businesses were destroyed. Major losses included our hospital, Post Office, and the two elementary schools.

Search and rescue operations started immediately. Our newly constructed Fire Administration building and Fire Station #1 is located just south of the path of the tornado, and indeed our firemen watched from their driveway as the tornado approached from the west. Station #1 personnel chose to move their fire apparatus out of the storm's path rather than taking shelter in their station's tornado safe room. This allowed both the preservation of their much needed rescue equipment as well as a quick deployment into the damage area after the wind passed.

Moore police personnel also immediately responded and assisted in rescuing many survivors. By evening there were hundreds of rescuers from all parts of Oklahoma on site, including our State's Incident Management Team, Oklahoma Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 1, and many assets of our Regional Response System. The Incident Command Post for the event was established in the truck bays at Fire Station #1. Incident Command remained in place through the visit of the President of the United States that occurred on Sunday, May 26th.

FEMA Programs Which Have Assisted Our Preparedness and Response

My City has ample experience in working with FEMA, particularly in the aftermath of the many disasters noted above. I am pleased to note that our most recent partnership with FEMA has for the most part been very positive.

Before recounting information about our disaster response and recovery efforts, however, please allow me to note that we participate in FEMA programs during non-disaster times. In fact, the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) funding received by the City of Moore and my office has contributed greatly to our preparedness for events like our most recent tornado. The City of Moore has been a recipient of EMPG funding for the past 15 years. Our participation in EMPG has allowed us over time to increase the capabilities of our overall program of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Being actively involved with emergency management issues statewide in Oklahoma, I can assure you that EMPG funding is vital for many of our local jurisdictions and many towns and counties with highly strapped budgets would not have an emergency management program at all were it not for EMPG.

EMPG is fundamentally different from the suite of post September 11, 2001 homeland security grants. EMPG has a history stretching back to the 1950's when it was recognized that there was a Federal interest in building emergency management capacity at the state and local levels. EMPG requires both a 50-50 match from state and local governments and various performance measures. IAEM-USA recognizes that all disasters start and end at the local level which emphasizes the importance of building and sustaining this capacity at the local governmental level—and EMPG funding should not be invested exclusively in any one specific level of government. We are grateful that this Committee has recognized the importance and uniqueness of EMPG by supporting that it be maintained as separate account within FEMA. It is important to have a grant focused on building emergency management capability for those entities at the local government level statutorily charged with the responsibilities of coordinating mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

The City of Moore strongly supports the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). This program provided invaluable assistance in our community after the 1999 and 2003 tornadoes. Citizens in our area were encouraged to construct safe rooms in their private residences at their expense and then receive a rebate through this program to defray a part of their construction costs. As a result of this very popular program, engineered safe rooms have become a norm for

mitigating the effects of tornadoes and severe winds, both in Moore and throughout Oklahoma. There are now over 4,000 homes in our City that have safe rooms; nearly one-quarter of those safe rooms were installed with HMGP funding assistance.

HMGP funding has also assisted us with expanding our outdoor warning siren system as the community has grown. Sirens were added at the new Oakridge Elementary School, Apple Valley Park, and in the Belmar housing addition in 2009; these are all just south of the track of the May 20th tornado and we know that our overall siren system was a key component in alerting our residents and guests of impending danger during our recent storms.

Emergency Management Institute

In 2009, the City of Moore and Moore Public Schools took a group to the National Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland to attend the Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools train-the-trainer course. Our multi-disciplinary group included a police sergeant, fire inspector, emergency manager, elementary school assistant principal, junior high school principal, high school assistant principal, district assistant superintendent, and district assistant transportation director. In addition, our county emergency manager, two sheriff's officers who are resource officers at our vocational technical school, as well as a representative from our county health department were part of the team. While at EMI, we learned about the various hazards that could affect our schools, our school personnel learned the basics of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System, and we all gained valuable knowledge in planning for emergencies occurring on our educational campuses. Many of the lessons learned at EMI were put into action during our recent tornado as well as in previous emergencies.

Debris

Since we have had experience with tornadoes, many of our residents already knew to move their debris to the curb and began doing so almost immediately. This helped us to expedite the debris removal. We had approximately 85% of the debris picked up within two months, and finished our debris removal efforts a few weeks ago. As of September 4th, our City has picked up and removed over 172,000 tons (or over 11,600 truckloads) of debris.

In addition to our experience, one of the reasons we were able to react so quickly is our participation in FEMA's Alternate Procedures Pilot Program for Debris that was part of the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act. This affords us the opportunity for reimbursement on a sliding scale emphasizing expedient removal of our tornado debris. This program increases the federal cost share for debris removed within 30 days to 85 percent federal (with the remaining 15% shared by state and local...in Oklahoma, it will be 12.5% state and 2.5% local). For the next sixty days, the federal share is reduced to 80 percent; after 90 days it becomes 75 percent. Although we already knew the value of quickly removing our debris - which promotes the swift

rebuilding of our community - we anticipate that this increased federal share will result in a cost savings to the City of Moore conservatively estimated at $470,000 for the first thirty days, and an additional $350,000 afterwards.

One suggestion to the process, however, concerns the beginning date of the sliding scale period. It currently begins with the first day of the declared incident period. In our case the 30 day period actually began before our city was struck by the tornado. Add in a few days of immediate search and rescue/emergency road clearing/securing the area for life safety, and a week or two to allow our residents the opportunity to visit their homes and attempt to salvage critical or treasured items - financial statements, pictures, etc., - and you can see that even under the quickest expediting that we would not want to begin debris removal for 15-20 days from the day of the event.

Overall our experience with the pilot program has been very positive.

The FEMA Public Assistance pilot program was not offered to us as the rules for the rollout had not yet been finalized at the time of our declaration.

Volunteerism

Thousands upon thousands of volunteers from throughout the nation have helped our community. For instance, our largest cemetery was impacted by the tornado. There was a great amount of debris in the cemetery – on the Monday before Memorial Day. On Wednesday, we marshaled over 2,500 emergent volunteers and they cleaned the cemetery within 4 hours. An amazing feat of community spirit! It also helped because our local Boy Scouts were able to safely post American flags in the cemetery allowing us the opportunity to still honor our veterans.

Through the organization of ServeMoore – a local grassroots coalition of community members and faith-based groups that organized in the hours after our event – more than 35,000 volunteers have spent over 230,000 hours in assisting our residents. These volunteers have been just absolutely amazing.

In addition, our City and our schools have received thousands of heartfelt monetary donations that will also assist us in quickly returning to normal.

Returning to Normal

We already have one private home rebuilt and occupied by its owner, with several others nearing completion and many more started. As of last Friday, September 13th, our Community Development department has issued 207 building permits for reconstruction of destroyed homes and over 370 additional permits for remodels of damaged homes within the affected areas. This is additional testimony to the concept of expedient debris removal and the great assistance to us from FEMA.

As noted earlier, two of our elementary schools were totally destroyed and one junior high school was heavily damaged. School began on normal schedule in August in the remodeled junior high school; the two elementary schools have been demolished and classes are ongoing in temporary facilities for this school year while their permanent facilities are reconstructed.

We have met frequently with local officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD has provided technical assistance with our current Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and is preparing us to receive an earmarked $26.3 million in CDBG disaster recovery funds to be used for housing, economic development and hazard mitigation. We are in the process of gathering our information – from pre-existing plans and other information – as to what we would like the City of Moore to look like as we recover. Our partnership with HUD will certainly move into the forefront as we continue further into long term recovery.

Our community also has a long term recovery committee in operation to help guide this process. We are excited that several of our social service agencies - including the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, United Methodist Committee on Relief, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul - have banded together and will be working in one location under one administrative structure to fill the long-term needs of our community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the City of Moore has taken it on the chin several times over the past 15 years. However, I want people to know that we are still here, and we'll be back better than ever. We are a resilient community located in a resilient state. People began talking about the "Oklahoma Standard" in the aftermath of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, referring to the way we respond to and recover from disasters and emergencies and the way we treat folks who come to help us. I would like to think that in the aftermath of May 20th that the term has changed to the "Moore, Oklahoma standard" in response to disasters and emergencies.

We have benefitted from a number of different federal programs including EMPG as mentioned earlier. The capabilities created and maintained, the plans created and maintained, and the equipment acquired with these funds have helped us to be ready to respond to disasters and emergencies. We have learned from our exercises and our responses to actual disasters and emergencies over the last decade and a half. Together, these things have created resilience that is unique to Moore. We are "Moore Strong".

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony, and I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

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