

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

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Submitted
By
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Chair Titus, Ranking Member Webster, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan, and our ongoing efforts to fundamentally reshape and strengthen FEMA's abilities to help people before, during, and after disasters.

The field of emergency management is at a pivotal moment. We are seeing tremendous change in the landscape of risk and in our professional roles. While our mission has not changed, our operating environment has. Ten years ago, we managed an average of 108 disasters a year. Today, we are managing 311 — including the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is very clear that physical changes in our climate — heat, cold, rain, drought, snow, wind, coastal flooding, and more — are irreversible over hundreds to thousands of years.

The changing climate is the biggest crisis facing our nation. It is making natural disasters more frequent, more intense, and more destructive, and this pattern will continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, structural inequities in our society are compounding the impacts of disasters for historically underserved communities. Left unaddressed, these twin challenges pose unacceptable risks to the nation.

The 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan identifies three ambitious goals we must achieve to address these challenges.

First, we must instill equity as a foundation of emergency management. It is important we recognize disasters affect individuals and communities differently. We must commit ourselves to reducing barriers to access and commit to delivering equitable outcomes for all survivors. Disaster survivors have already experienced their worst day, and we must ensure our policies and programs meet them where they are and provide support and nothing less. Systems which create barriers and result in inequitable outcomes serve no one, especially in times of crisis. We must put people first and reduce the burdens to individuals and communities by making our programs simpler, more accessible, and more user-friendly.

We have already made important changes to the way we provide assistance to make this true. For instance, some homeowners had difficulty proving they owned their homes if their property had been handed down informally through the years. We took action by expanding the types of ownership documentation we can accept, including documents like receipts for major repairs or improvements, court documents, public officials' letters, mobile home park letters, and even applicant self-certification for mobile homes and travel trailers as a last resort. In addition, FEMA has changed the way we calculate the threshold for property losses to qualify for our Direct Housing program (such as a trailer or mobile home). Our goal—ensure equitable damage evaluations regardless of the amount of damage to the home. Changing the calculation of the threshold from a fixed dollar floor of \$17,000 to a simpler \$12 per square foot, resulted in more than 1,400 families receiving assistance who would not have been considered for direct housing in the past. That means 1,400 families with a roof over their head, beds to sleep in, and a stove to cook with. This change especially made a difference for survivors with lower value homes. These are a few examples of where our people first approach has made a difference. But we can do more. We will do more.

We also know, the more our workforce resembles the nation we serve, the better we will be at serving our nation. Which is why our Strategic Plan focuses our recruiting efforts to reach individuals from underrepresented communities, including through partnering with organizations like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium of Tribal Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Our goal is to create hiring pipelines from these institutions into the field of emergency management, opening new opportunities for underrepresented communities who may not see themselves reflected in today's workforce, and as a result, may have been dissuaded from joining the emergency management profession.

As you know, FEMA is not just a response and recovery agency. One of my highest priorities is to focus equally on what we can do on the front end, before a disaster – as this is often as important, if not more important than what we do when a disaster strikes.

Which is why our second strategic goal is to lead whole of community in climate resilience. We must recognize we are facing a climate crisis. FEMA can educate not only our own staff, but also the nation about the impacts our changing climate poses, and how this will influence the work we do as emergency managers. We must integrate future conditions into our planning efforts. We must think bigger about how we approach mitigation and shift our projects to those with community-wide impact, and, as with disaster relief, we must eliminate barriers underserved communities face to receive mitigation assistance.

I would like to thank Congress for working with the Biden-Harris Administration to provide FEMA with additional resources to reduce the impact of climate change by passing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. This legislation provides significant funding to establish revolving loan funds under the STORM Act, as well as for FEMA's other Hazard Mitigation Assistance grant programs. These investments will only grow in importance as climate change continues to alter the landscape of risk facing emergency managers across the country. Which is why we've made resources available, such as new Direct Technical Assistance, for local communities to provide support for both project and application-specific needs, as well as community-wide resilience needs.

I am also committed to making sure FEMA's workforce is well-equipped to advise our partners on the best ways to build climate resilient communities. I am directing a new collaborative steering group comprised of leadership from FEMA's program offices to begin a multi-year initiative to incorporate the dynamics of a changing climate into relevant training, planning, grant eligibility, and exercises, as appropriate. FEMA program offices and the U.S. Fire Administration will also 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. I believe a more climate literate workforce which considers the impacts of future risks in disaster planning and understands how the natural world, in conjunction with our current systems, can help or burden survivors, will position FEMA to truly lead the way on hazard mitigation and resilience.

Our third strategic goal is to promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation. The increase in frequency, severity, and complexity of disasters has heightened demands on FEMA's workforce and on the first responder workforces in every state, tribal nation, county, and city in the nation which comprise the broader emergency management community.

To rise to this challenge, FEMA must expand its approach to agency readiness and to national preparedness. We will accomplish this in the following ways. First, we need a better understanding of the value and skill set emergency managers bring to bear, in other words, a clear standard definition of the competencies, required to become a qualified emergency manager.

Second, like other professions, emergency management must standardize its career paths, and 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 by making training available to emergency managers anywhere they are, at any time in their careers. We are 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.

Third, FEMA is improving our ability to meet the increasing number of current and emergent threats requiring federal support. As FEMA is uniquely positioned to provide incident management and coordination support for increasingly complex missions beyond typical Stafford Act emergencies and disasters, we are envisioning, planning, and preparing for incidents which do not fall into common disaster categories. I want to thank Congress for including funding in the recent Omnibus for a non-Stafford Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT). Having this capability will help us more rapidly and effectively provide incident management support for these emerging threats.

We are also in the process of looking at the architecture of our Stafford Act disaster workforce to better meet the challenges of the yearlong operational tempo which is our new reality. As FEMA's incident management and incident support workforce continues to grow, we are prioritizing the growth of the support workforce which enables them, such as the procurement specialists needed to execute the contracts and mission assignments, which allows us to actually mobilize assistance; the computer specialist who facilitate data and information sharing within FEMA's IT infrastructure; those who ensure civil rights are protected in all activities; and the personnel necessary to train the workforce, manage operations, and the experts who focus on employee wellness.

The last group is so critical. Dealing with an unrelenting pace of a year-round cycle of disasters and crisis takes its toll on the FEMA team. To be ready for the next disaster, whenever it comes, we must look out for the physical, emotional and mental health of our people. We are looking at our existing flexibilities to ensure that our people can rest and reset, and take care of themselves and their families. We cannot do what we do without our people. Since I last appeared before this Subcommittee in June of last year, FEMA has been tested on many fronts, and our people

have risen to the occasion. Their adaptability, dedication, and willingness to do the hard work is unquestionable and unbelievable.

In closing, the 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan is ambitious, but it is equal to the challenges we face. 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, and I look forward to your questions.