

STATEMENT

OF

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UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC

ON

“The Role of FEMA and Emergency Management in COVID-19 Response”

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Introduction

Good morning and thank you, Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Patrick Sheehan, and I am the Director of the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. I am grateful for the invitation to discuss the role of emergency management and FEMA during this COVID-19 pandemic, and to share some of Tennessee's story.

First, I want to acknowledge the loss of more than 11,000 Tennesseans and 530,000 Americans to this virus. Our hearts join in mourning the too soon loss of life that so many Tennesseans and Americans have faced in this last year. Almost all of us have experienced the grief of losing family or friends to this pandemic and our hearts ache too.

Second, I want to express my sincere gratitude for my teammates, for the Tennessee Department of Health, and the medical personnel across our state and nation for the dedicated work they continue to do, for our local responders, for the Tennessee National Guard, for FEMA, and emergency managers everywhere. Thank you. This pandemic has challenged these heroes in ways that few expected, and time and time again, they step up and serve. It is awe inspiring to see the commitment of our public health agencies and partners to our neighbors and humbling to work shoulder to shoulder with them in this historic time.

Tennessee's Disasters and Emergencies in 2020

2020 tested the emergency management and public health and medical systems in Tennessee in ways that were unprecedented. Before the first case was detected in Tennessee, Governor Lee's office, the Tennessee Department of Health, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, Tennessee National Guard, and other partners were working together to prepare our state. We began pouring over reports from the world over, reevaluating our plans and protocols, and working to prepare for the unknown road that was ahead of us – and this was just in January and February.

On March 3, 2020 a devastating series of tornadoes struck Tennessee. The largest of the dozen tornadoes struck Nashville not long after midnight and stayed on the ground for more than 60 miles, taking the lives of 25 Tennesseans from Nashville to Cookeville. I am incredibly grateful for the quick work of FEMA as we got the response and recovery efforts underway. Tennessee's investments in collaboration with local emergency management agencies, public works, and first responder organizations showed us what is so difficult to measure – that our efforts to prepare had made us better. The work of emergency managers from TEMA, Metro-Nashville, Wilson and Putnam counties, and with our partners – and the incredible outpouring of volunteers - was heartwarming.

On March 5, 2020 the first COVID case was confirmed in Tennessee by the Tennessee Department of Health's Public Health Laboratory – one of the first in the nation to be certified to test for what was still a new virus. Since that first case, nearly 7,000,000 tests have been conducted, confirming more than 660,000 cases.

On April 12, 2020 and April 13, 2020 severe storms with tornadoes and torrential rains again struck Tennessee, from Chattanooga and across much of the eastern Grand Division. While the volunteer spirit of Tennesseans was again on display, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of concern during response

and recovery operations. During a February meeting in Tennessee's EOC, one of our Emergency Services Coordinators flagged the need for changes to sheltering policies to shift to non-congregate settings while we were in a pandemic; we are fortunate that FEMA leadership and partners were anticipating the same need and took proactive actions to make non-congregate sheltering their policy and available to those Tennesseans that had lost their homes.

May 3, 2020 brought a derecho to Tennessee and May 4, 2020 brought a "wake low" both with damaging winds that resulted in another major disaster for 20 counties.

During these months Tennessee, like the rest of the nation, faced increasing cases, hospitalizations, and deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Lee established a COVID-19 Unified Command Group comprised of TEMA, the Tennessee Department of Health, the Tennessee National Guard, and a supporting team to help ensure a data-informed and evidence-based approach to managing our response to the pandemic. One of the first challenges was to increase COVID-19 testing capacity and availability and Governor Lee set aggressive goals for our capacities and announced that there would be barrier free testing across the state.

During the Spring and Summer of 2020 our nation's supply chains ground to a halt, bringing the delivery of need equipment and supplies to a trickle. TEMA, like FEMA and state and local emergency management agencies across America, worked to build operational reserves of personal protective equipment (PPE), durable medical equipment (DME) including ventilators, and other necessary supplies. Emergency managers and our partners used our logistics expertise to help stabilize the availability of PPE and other supplies within our states and communities. In 2020 TEMA made more than 28,000 shipments, containing millions of items - n95 and kn95 respirators, surgical and cloth masks, face shields, gloves, gowns, sanitizer, wipes, shoe covers, and other supplies to our local partners, first responders, medical personnel, and teachers and other education staff, in order to help ensure their safety. A large part of these efforts is made possible by the funding provided by FEMA to the states.

While not necessarily or completely within the purview of emergency management, our nation must address the lack of domestic capability for critical manufacturing operations. Last June my colleague from Oregon, Andrew Phelps, outlined in detail many challenges and potential solutions to supply chain management, especially as it related to the Strategic National Stockpile to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. In addition to his remarks there, I would recommend that something akin to the Defense Industrial Base be applied to examine our nation's capabilities to maintain and bolster its critical infrastructure and lifelines.

Tennessee's Vaccination Plan - Protecting the Most Vulnerable and Supporting Equity

The Tennessee Department of Health undertook a tremendous planning effort for vaccinations starting in August. They convened a stakeholder group of more than 30 organizations to gain their input and crafted a plan based on risk and informed by the National Academy's Framework for Equitable Allocation. Tennessee created a plan to quickly protect our most vulnerable populations and ensure that those that are most likely to miss out were included and sought out. TDH's Office of Minority Health and Disparities Elimination, the Vaccine-Preventable Diseases and Immunization Program Office, and their partners continue to work with leadership and the Unified Command Group to ensure that each eligible Tennessean has access to the vaccine. Local health personnel, Tennessee National Guard personnel and

onboarded providers have administered almost two million doses with support from volunteers and emergency managers.

Christmas Bombing in Downtown Nashville

At 6:30 on Christmas morning an RV filled with explosives was detonated on Second Avenue in Downtown Nashville. Due to the heroism and diligence of six Nashville Police Officers and the peculiar warnings of the bombmaker there were no fatalities and only minor injuries to a handful of those that were nearby. The detonation damaged 41 buildings, including some of the oldest, most historic, in the city, and damaged the abilities of a communications and data building to maintain power. The loss of power to this building eventually impacted telephony and data services to some part of seven states, and caused significant problems to some cellular services, first responder communications devices, telephony, internet connectivity, and impacted or rendered inoperable scores of Public Safety Answering Points.

The FBI, ATF, TBI, Nashville Police Department, Tennessee Highway Patrol and other law enforcement agencies worked together in a coordinated manner to rapidly investigate the explosion and identify suspects, secure the crime scene, and help adjudicate appropriate access to the site to stabilize infrastructure. The Metro Nashville Office of Emergency Management, Nashville Fire Department, TEMA, utility providers, American Red Cross, and other community organizations worked to provide resources to survivors and to manage the response and restoration of services. In both the law enforcement and the emergency management spheres of operations, the investment in relationships, joint training and operations, and history of collaborating on events in the city, region and state served to help keep a focus on public safety and rapid stabilization of infrastructure.

Our FEMA partners were also rapidly available to serve as a liaison, thanks to the investment of having FEMA Integration Team (FIT) members already working in Tennessee. We were the second state to work with FEMA to have these federal employees working shoulder-to-shoulder in state emergency management agencies, and the concept continues to prove its worth.

Before Christmas Day ended, Governor Lee requested an emergency declaration inclusive of all categories of Public Assistance. Some days later a declaration was granted for Category B, limited to Direct Federal Assistance. Limiting “EM” declarations to Direct Federal Assistance has become common practice for FEMA, but it is not rooted in the statute nor is it rooted in policies. The City of Nashville could have benefited from an Emergency Declaration that made Category B (Emergency Protective Measures) eligible for reimbursement due to their expenditures in police, fire fighter, and Emergency Operations Center overtime, and other measures taken to safeguard the public safety and health.

Recommendations

There are opportunities to improve and strengthen FEMA and our nation’s emergency management system. by

1. Speeding the adjudication Private Non-Profit organizations Requests for Public Assistance (RPAs) currently in backlog
2. Prioritizing the review and approval of Environmental and Historic Preservation (EHP) forms in queue

3. Simplifying the experience for disaster survivors by creating a single, universal application for disaster survivors that connects them to available federal programs they are qualified for
4. Raising the threshold for Public Assistance Small Projects from the current \$131,000 to a higher amount in order to speed up distribution of aid to eligible applicants and simplify the process
5. Revisiting the impact of FEMA's September 1, 2020 memo on eligible expenditures and reevaluating for policy consistency

Conclusion

The year 2020 provided several opportunities to demonstrate the value of our efforts to forge a prepared State of Tennessee. Emergency managers demonstrated that we work best when jurisdictions, stakeholders, and departments work together. When the nation invests in strong preparedness programs through the Emergency Management Performance Grant and similar programs, we forge a robust system that takes care of survivors and restores lifelines.

Our nation's emergency management system works best when there is predictability in FEMA's disaster programs and consistency in their application across regions and the nation. Actions deemed to be eligible emergency protective measures a year into the pandemic response, should reasonably be considered emergency protective measures in the previous year, and not "increased operating costs."

Our republic's emergency management system works best when there is clarity and transparency in policy, regulations, and the resources available from the federal government. When state emergency management agencies and our county and city partners can set realistic expectations for what supplies or materials are available, we can more appropriately prepare our states and jurisdictions by resourcing and planning for resource gaps.

This pandemic, coupled with the other disasters and emergencies we have faced, demonstrated the value of our nation's emergency management system. With FEMA's support, states have been able to protect the health and safety of our citizens, ensure the safe reopening of schools, increase medical surge capacity, vaccinate millions, and respond and recover from other disasters.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you this morning and testify. I look forward to your questions.