



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**HON. GEORGE DUNLAP
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
MECKLENBURG COUNTY, N.C.**

ON BEHALF OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

**HEARING TITLED, "CREATING A MORE RESILIENT NATION: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES"
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY - SUBCOMMITTEE ON
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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INTRODUCTION

Chair Demings, Ranking Member Cammack and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important role counties play in making our nation more resilient.

My name is George Dunlap, and I serve as the Chairman of the Board in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, and as Vice Chair of the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee and Large Urban County Caucus at NACo.

NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States, including Alaska's boroughs and Louisiana's parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities. As part of NACo's mission, the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee works to strengthen county resiliency by advocating for federal policies and programs that help county leaders identify and manage risk and allow counties to become more flexible and responsive to disasters. Through sustainable practices and infrastructure, counties become better prepared to address these issues in a manner that can minimize the impact on our residents and businesses.

My home of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina is home to over 1.1 million residents to whom we provide critical services, including public safety and emergency services, public housing, health and human services, transportation and more. We predominantly rely on local property taxes to ensure our many responsibilities are met; however, due to constraints on local revenues that are enforced at the state level, a strong intergovernmental partnership is critical as we work to meet the challenges of today and plan for the future.

Abutting the South Carolina border, Mecklenburg County stretches over 500 square miles in southwest North Carolina with a large urban center in the city of Charlotte surrounded by smaller, more rural communities. All of America's counties are highly diverse and vary immensely in geography and natural resources, social and political systems, cultural, economic and structural circumstances, public health and environmental responsibilities. Of the nation's 3,069 counties, approximately 70 percent are considered rural with populations of less than 50,000, and 50 percent of these counties have populations below 25,000. At the same time, there are more than 120 major urban counties, where essential services are provided locally to more than 130 million county residents each day.

Paramount among other critical county responsibilities is the role of counties in community preparedness. Counties are on the front lines of defense before and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Following a disaster, local elected officials and emergency managers are often the first on the scene and play a key role in the coordination of local emergency management efforts. Other key county staff involved in pre- and post-disaster efforts include local police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, because counties are major owners of public infrastructure, we are also uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters before they occur. Collectively, we own 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, over 650 nursing homes and directly support a third of the nation's airports and public transit systems. We also own and

maintain a wide variety of public safety infrastructure, including roadside ditches, flood control channels, stormwater culverts and pipes and other infrastructure used to funnel water away from low-lying roads, properties and businesses. Counties provide extensive outreach and education to residents on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters, and we work to reduce water pollution, adopt setbacks for land use plans and are responsible for water recharge areas, green infrastructure and water conservation programs.

Over the past 20 years, natural and man-made disasters have increased in frequency, severity and cost. On average, 24 percent of counties have experienced at least one disaster in each of the last three years. Last year, 965 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster, 590 counties had at least one emergency declaration and 850 counties had at least one disaster declaration. During 2021, the nation experienced 20 separate billion-dollar disasters, which totaled approximately \$145 billion in damages.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation. Rather, we are a part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from both natural and man-made disasters. Like the federal government, counties are entrusted by taxpayers to provide a variety of important services to their residents, and we stand ready to work with our intergovernmental counterparts to improve community resiliency and mitigate the impacts of future disasters. To this end, counties offer the following considerations:

- **Ensuring federal programs provide communities with the tools and flexibility necessary to address issues specific to their jurisdiction is paramount to improving our nation's overall resilience.**
- **Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources for underserved and disadvantaged communities by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.**
- **County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.**

Ensuring federal programs provide communities with the tools and flexibility necessary to address issues specific to their jurisdiction is paramount to improving our nation's overall resilience.

Disaster response, recovery and mitigation starts local and ends local. Counties are currently tackling one of the largest cumulative recovery efforts our nation has ever experienced in the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously continuing to meet our daily responsibilities around ensuring our communities remain safe and resilient to the next pandemic or disaster. While we are doing our part at the local level, effective resilience improvements would not be possible without the continued support from the federal government who administers programs that provide vital resources to support assessing potential future threats. Ensuring these programs remain flexible and accessible is vital to increasing the resilience of our nation as each jurisdiction must have the authority to make decisions unique to the challenges being faced.

One such program that large urban areas like Mecklenburg County rely on is the Federal Emergency Management Agency Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) program. UASI assists high-threat, high-density urban areas in building and sustaining the capabilities necessary to prevent, protect against, mitigate,

respond to and recover from acts of terrorism. Funding provided by UASI is critical to ensuring the nation's most populous areas can protect both critical infrastructure and our residents during high profile and mass gathering events. However, because UASI eligibility is based on an annual threat vulnerability formula that is used to determine the number of UASI jurisdictions, future funding through the program is not guaranteed.

For example, the UASI jurisdiction of Charlotte, North Carolina – which encompasses Mecklenburg County – went unfunded in 2019. As a result of this loss in funding, our jurisdiction was not able to fund planned purchases of anti-terrorism equipment for law enforcement, bomb squad equipment and communications equipment. Given that the Charlotte area holds major public events almost weekly, and with the 2020 Republican National Convention having been scheduled for that August, our ability to proactively address and respond to known threats and hazards was dramatically diminished.

The uncertainty in UASI funding from UASI has left many counties in similar circumstances to Mecklenburg County. NACo was encouraged to see that the number of UASI jurisdictions increased from 31 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 to 36 in FY 2022 in the recent notice of funding opportunity that was released last week but remain concerned that future funding for these areas is not guaranteed. To address these concerns, NACo [strongly supports](#) Chairwoman Demings and Representative Bacon's *Homeland Security Capabilities Preservation Act (H.R. 5615)*. This critical piece of legislation would provide jurisdictions who were in receipt of UASI funds in previous fiscal years with resources and assistance to continue projects previously initiated by this funding and ensure counties have the ability to continue to address threats specific to their areas.

Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources for underserved and disadvantaged communities by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.

Unfortunately, bureaucratic red tape follows a disaster. For example, requiring the completion of complex and overly burdensome paperwork by communities who may be entirely unfamiliar with system protocols and who are attempting to undertake these processes during the most stressful times of their lives can significantly impede progress when it is needed most. Populations that feel the biggest impact are often our underserved and disadvantaged communities where resources and capacity to complete applications and meet critical deadlines can be severely exacerbated.

Ensuring no communities are left behind in the bid to recover requires reexamining current procedures for applying for federal funding. Implementing plain language into applications, providing clear timelines and identifying resources available to assist applicants during the process are paramount to improving the resiliency of our communities. Excessive paperwork and lack of clarity can be particularly difficult for jurisdictions who may be under resourced or dealing with co-occurring disasters, as we saw with many parts of the country throughout the last two years during the pandemic.

Counties appreciate initiatives from FEMA, such as the streamlined application process developed for COVID-19 Public Assistance funding and the Direct Technical Assistance (DTA) offered to communities who are interested in applying for the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program. While these are worthwhile endeavors, safeguarding equal access for all communities remains a concern. Many of these FEMA program areas are understaffed and face other challenges that can result in delayed response times and the degradation of the overall assistance being offered.

Therefore, counties are supportive of the recently introduced *FEMA Equity Act (H.R.7668/S.4159)* from Chairman Bennie Thompson and Senator Elizabeth Warren, which would seek to address inequities in access to federal disaster assistance programs and reduce barriers to vital recovery and response resources. This legislation is a critical first step in ensuring communities who have habitually been left out of the disaster recovery process are able to equitably access funding to rebuild and mitigate against future disasters.

County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.

Counties across the country are working daily to address the needs of our residents and make decisions that drive the success of our jurisdictions. While we are doing our part at the local level, [45 states limit the ability of counties to raise revenue](#) in various ways, making the intergovernmental partnership vital to meeting our public sector responsibilities. Only 29 states authorize counties to collect sales taxes, but almost always under various restrictions. 26 states impose a sales tax limit and 19 require voter approval. For western counties, who are at great risk of flooding and wildfires, state restrictions on local revenues can be even more impactful, as much of the land within western county boundaries is considered federal land, thus removing the ability of a county to levy property taxes.

While disasters are inherently local, counties rely on our state and federal partners for critical disaster recovery tools, like funding assistance, human capital and technical assistance. Without proper federal and state support, county recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full capabilities necessary to rebuild our communities and make them more resilient against future disasters. In an environment where counties have limited financial flexibility, a strong intergovernmental partnership is crucial to community recovery and key to the success of future mitigation efforts.

With that in mind, counties call on Congress to consider the *State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Fiscal Recovery, Infrastructure, and Disaster Relief Flexibility Act (H.R.5735/S.3011)*, introduced by Representative Dusty Johnson and Senators John Cornyn and Alex Padilla. This critical legislation would allow for counties to allocate up to \$10 million in funding received from the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund – included in the American Rescue Plan Act – for eligible transportation projects and disaster relief. This added flexibility would allow for counties to invest in our nation’s recovery on the ground, based on local priorities, circumstances and needs.

Conclusion

Counties are on the front lines of the pre- and post-disaster efforts, and without proper federal assistance, recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full support necessary to rebuild our communities and return to normal the lives of our residents.

Chair Demings, Ranking Member Cammack and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for inviting me to testify here today.

Counties stand ready to work side-by-side with our federal and state partners to make our communities more resilient and ensure the health, well-being and safety of our citizens.