

STATEMENT

OF

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“An Assessment of Federal Recovery Efforts from Recent Disasters”

Submitted
By
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Titus, Ranking Member Meadows, and Members of the Committee. My name is Jeffrey Byard and I am the Associate Administrator for the Office of Response and Recovery at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On behalf of Acting Administrator, Pete Gaynor, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss recovery efforts from recent disasters, in addition to how we are preparing to respond to and recover from future disasters.

Recent Disaster Years

As you are aware, the last few years of disasters have been historic, challenging, and transformative. In late August of 2017, Hurricane Harvey struck Texas. Then Hurricane Irma swept through the Caribbean, striking the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the entire State of Florida. Following this, Hurricane Maria struck a devastating blow to the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. These disasters – each historic in their own right – put this Agency to the test. Meanwhile, devastating wildfires swept through the western United States, further stretching the finite resources of FEMA personnel and capabilities.

In 2018, Hurricanes Florence and Michael, as well as Super Typhoon Yutu struck and caused significant damage, destruction, and ongoing challenges for North Carolina, Florida, and the Northern Mariana Islands, respectively. Again, in addition to these devastating hurricanes, FEMA also responded to and supported recovery from historic wildfires in the western United States.

In 2019, so far this year, the President has declared over 50 major disasters and 14 emergency declarations across 40 states, tribes, and territories of our nation, involving flooding, hurricanes, tornados, fires, and earthquakes. These numbers do not account for the 13 Fire Management Assistance Grant awards that have been made to states who have fought or are fighting significant wildfires that threaten such destruction as would constitute a major disaster.

The road to recovery from disasters – large and small – continues long after the impacting event. FEMA works with states, tribes, and territories to establish joint field offices (JFOs) so that all entities working toward recovery are co-located to assist impacted disaster survivors, as well as to assist community governments as they plan and undertake the work of rebuilding damaged infrastructure. In many cases, community recovery from a disaster can take years.

The 2017 hurricane season put into sharp relief the difficulties in sustaining the current model for disaster response and recovery in the United States. A series of factors, such as an aging population, increasing urbanization, population shifts toward coastal areas, increased development in the fire-prone wildland urban interface create more vulnerability for the nation. This evolution has led to continuously increasing disaster costs as billion-dollar disasters are on the rise and has resulted in a system with considerable amounts of unmanaged risk.

FEMA assistance can be seen as a no-limit, no-premium insurance policy for infrastructure and property. This injects disincentives against self-protection measures that might otherwise be undertaken by state, local, tribal, and territorial governments (SLTTs) through means such as insurance or mitigation. It also burdens Federal taxpayers writ-large with the risk management choices of state and local governments over which those taxpayers have little or no influence, such as land-use and code and standard decisions are by and large non-Federal.

The 2018-2022 FEMA Strategic Plan acknowledges that FEMA is not, and cannot be, the Nation's sole or primary emergency management entity, and it therefore defines emergency management as a shared responsibility in which disaster operations are ideally *Federally supported, state managed, and locally executed*. This is the framework of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), which defines the Federal role in emergency management as *supplementing* local efforts to provide disaster assistance.

The Importance of Innovation

Recognizing the challenges that lay before us, FEMA, in coordination with state, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) governments, emergency managers, and partners from across the country, formulated the Strategic Plan with three strategic goals: 1) Build a Culture of Preparedness; 2) Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters; and 3) Reduce the Complexity of FEMA. At the heart of the Plan is the concept that the optimal response and recovery to disasters is state managed, locally executed, and federally supported. In our support role at the federal level, for us to be able to keep pace and effectively help people before, during, and after disasters, FEMA must always find ways to continuously improve. We must innovate.

Disaster Staffing

With disaster recovery taking place in JFOs across the country, we need to make sure that we are managing our workforce in a way to ensure we have the right people, in the right places, at the right times. At FEMA, we have a variety of employee types to accomplish our unique mission, which requires diverse skillsets and expertise. When the capacity of Agency personnel is stretched thin and personnel resources need augmentation, we call upon employees from the Department of Homeland Security and across the federal government who have the skills we need in our disaster operations through our Surge Capacity Force authority. The Surge Capacity Force has been invaluable to FEMA as it provides critically needed personnel augmentation, skill sets, and support from across the federal government when they are needed most.

An additional practice at FEMA is the "local hires" effort that employs residents, who are often themselves disaster survivors, to help their fellow citizens in the recovery process as a supplement for disaster operational staffing. This practice of employing disaster survivors and others impacted locally adds to the long-term recovery of the local community by bringing a special understanding of the problems faced by their fellow disaster survivors.

In addition to taking full advantage of these tools, FEMA needs to ensure that we are using our existing workforce effectively and strategically. After the 2017 hurricane season, the Agency began the 2018 Incident Management Workforce Review (IMWR). The goal of the review was to ensure FEMA has the ability to deploy the right people with the right skills to the right place and at the right time to help survivors after a disaster. FEMA is realigning staff and consolidating duties where appropriate. We are currently working toward the implementation of our findings and look forward to the positive impact this will have on how we utilize our workforce.

As we find ways to innovate, one critical tool that Congress has given FEMA is the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA) of 2018. Specifically, Section 1222 amended the Stafford Act to authorize FEMA's Cadre of Response and Recovery Employees (CORE), under certain conditions, to apply for open positions at the Agency in the same manner as competitive service employees. This important authority has allowed FEMA to retain the valuable knowledge, skills, and experience that this type of employee develops over years of supporting disaster work. I want to thank Congress for passing this Act and report to the Committee that this section is fully implemented. CORE employees are presently applying for new opportunities, and several have already been hired as permanent, full-time employees under this authority.

Delivering FEMA Assistance

We also need to be innovative in how we deliver our programs to those we serve. As previously stated, one of FEMA's strategic goals is to reduce the complexity of the Agency. As such, significant focus has been placed on improving the Agency's largest grant program, Public Assistance (PA), to make it more accessible, accurate, efficient, and timely for applicants. This has been done through the creation and implementation of the National Public Assistance Delivery Model. The development of this new program started long before I arrived at the Agency; however, the impact of its development and implementation is significant for FEMA, our partners, and survivors in disaster-impacted communities.

Beginning in 2014, FEMA conducted an in-depth internal review and analysis effort, accompanied by external outreach, that demonstrated the need for significant changes in the way PA is implemented. As a result, FEMA developed a new business model for PA Program delivery and those changes are ongoing. The delivery model has three basic elements, which support a simplified and streamlined grant application process: 1) Simplified roles and responsibilities, and re-trained Federal staff; 2) Cloud-based customer relationship and program management software known as the PA Grants Manager and Grants Portal; and 3) Pooled resources in certain locations, known as Consolidated Resource Centers (CRCs), so multiple disaster operations can tap into trained experts when developing PA projects.

Over the past several years, we have received positive feedback from our SLTT partners on this innovation, to include improved transparency and better use of technology. The success of the

delivery model depends on the strength of internal and external partnerships. A key aspect of the model is continuous improvement – monitoring progress, receiving feedback, and making on-going adjustments and improvements to processes and tools.

Another innovation that is taking root across disaster recoveries and making a significant impact is the Public Assistance Alternative Procedures, often referred to as Section 428 authority. This authority, provided by the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013, helps reduce federal disaster costs, increases flexibility in the administration of disaster assistance, expedites the provision of assistance, and provides financial incentives for timely and cost-effective completion of projects.

Additionally, through the DRRA, Congress authorized the creation of a new pre-disaster mitigation program funded by a 6 percent set-aside from federal post-disaster grant funding. This new grant program, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), will be transformational. It will allow FEMA to support states and communities as they undertake new and innovative infrastructure projects that reduce the risks they face from disasters. The BRIC program aims to categorically shift the federal focus away from reactive disaster spending and toward research-supported, proactive investment in community resilience. In order to inform the creation of this important program, FEMA conducted one of the largest stakeholder engagement efforts in the Agency’s history. The public will have another opportunity to provide input on the BRIC program when the program policy is published for comment.

In the meantime, FEMA is already using the funding set aside for BRIC to advance the objective of reducing disaster risk. This September, the Agency made \$250 million available for pre-disaster mitigation under our existing grant program – including \$125 million specifically for infrastructure projects. This funding included up to \$12.5 million to help states, localities, territories, and tribes develop future mitigation projects. The application period for this year’s pre-disaster mitigation grant program is currently open for all states, tribes, and territories that have FEMA-approved hazard mitigation plans. Like the National Public Assistance Delivery Model and the Section 428 authorities, we want to get this right because we believe this will have a significant impact on our ability to effectively support our SLTTs recover from disasters.

Preparing for the Next Disaster & Conclusion

In emergency management, we are always mindful that “every day is earthquake season,” and “it only takes one hurricane.” The next disaster will not wait for us to rest and recover from the previous one. Therefore, FEMA and our partners across the country must ensure we are ready for the next disaster – large or small.

In partnership with Congress, FEMA has developed new ways of doing business that are having significantly positive effects on our ability to support communities as they work to recover from

disasters. While I have only highlighted some of these key innovation initiatives today, there are many other critical efforts underway by the Agency to help us meet the goals identified in our Strategic Plan, as well as our ever-important mission: helping people before, during, and after disasters.

I thank the Members of this Subcommittee for your partnership, the important role you have as representatives of your constituents, and your continued support.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.