

Statement of  
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before the

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,  
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
U.S. Senate

on

*“The Role of Federal Executive Boards in Pandemic Preparedness”*

September 28, 2007

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am pleased to be here on behalf of our Director, Linda Springer, to discuss the role of Federal Executive Boards and how they can assist with Pandemic Preparedness and other Federal emergency planning and response efforts. We appreciate that this subcommittee has recognized the value of these boards, and we share your commitment to increasing their effectiveness.

Federal Executive Boards were first established by Presidential Directive in 1961 to address the need for greater coordination of regional and field activities of the Federal Government. The boards were directed to work on interagency regional cooperation and to establish liaison with state and local governments. There are currently 28 Federal Executive Boards across our nation. The contributions these boards can make towards emergency preparedness and assistance for Federal employees and their families – and for all Americans – have become more evident as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza issued by President Bush in 2005 also provides opportunities for Federal Executive Boards to play a critical role which I will discuss further in my testimony.

### **OPM’s Role with Federal Executive Boards**

In close collaboration with the Chairs and Executive Directors of the Federal Executive Boards, OPM has established two primary lines of business – Emergency Preparedness, Security and Employee Safety, and Human Capital Readiness – as the focus for board activities. In addition to these lines of business, the boards are also expected to focus on establishing communication channels that can help build understanding and teamwork

among Federal agencies in the field. The experiences of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina have demonstrated that these relationships need to be in place before an emergency occurs. We believe these communication channels can also enhance the effectiveness of non-emergency activities such as the Combined Federal Campaign program which facilitates donations by Federal employees to local and national charities.

While the Federal Government received criticism for its response to Hurricane Katrina, there were many successes that have not received the same level of attention. In particular, I want to acknowledge the key role that was played by the New Orleans Federal Executive Board, and its Executive Director, Kathy Barré, during that crisis. I think her efforts help to underscore how these boards can help coordinate the flow of information and guidance to the Federal workforce in the aftermath of such a catastrophe. During Katrina, the Board's Executive Director in New Orleans –

- Coordinated with OPM and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to collect information and communicate issues of concern regarding the Federal workforce from Federal agencies at the local level;
- Organized conference calls among agency executives, before and after the event, enabling them to coordinate decision-making on Federal workforce issues;
- Facilitated sharing of Federal workforce information to and from Washington by organizing teleconferences with FEMA, OPM, and other agencies;
- Obtained and disseminated guidance from OPM on human resource policies which apply in emergency situations; and,
- Helped to identify both the needs and the status of local Federal workers and their families to make sure they were part of FEMA's response activities.

During the past two years, as Katrina recovery and reconstruction efforts have continued, the New Orleans Federal Executive Board has continued to serve as a primary forum for discussion of ongoing issues related to the Federal workforce.

Two more recent events have demonstrated the importance of these boards and the relationships and communication channels they can bring to the table at the Federal regional level during emergency situations – the Minnesota bridge collapse and the contraction of tuberculosis by a Housing and Urban Development employee located in the New York City Federal Building. The bridge collapse occurred at the same time as the annual Conference of Federal Executive Boards in Washington, DC. Executive Director Ray Morris from the Minnesota board, whom you will hear from today, was in attendance, and immediately went into action to ensure updates were provided to local Federal agencies on the status of recovery efforts, road detours, and potential workforce issues. Similarly, in response to the tuberculosis incident, the Executive Director of our Federal Executive Board in New York City met quickly with agency heads working in the Federal Building and officials from the New York City Office of Health and Mental Hygiene. The meeting resulted in the immediate distribution of a letter describing the incident to all tenant agencies and their employees in that building.

## **OPM and Pandemic Influenza Preparedness**

Director Springer and all of us at OPM take very seriously the direction President Bush has assigned to our agency with respect to pandemic preparedness. To help departments and agencies mitigate the effects of a pandemic event, OPM has developed human resource policies and mechanisms to assure the safety of the Federal workforce and the continuity of Federal operations. We have provided agencies with training and information for their human resources and emergency preparedness personnel. We have also conducted townhall meetings with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to educate Federal employees on pandemic preparedness.

Federal Executive Boards have played, and should continue to play, a key role with this effort. Last year, the boards distributed OPM's three-part pandemic guidance to Federal agencies at the local level and sponsored tabletop exercises using pandemic scenarios, to increase agency regional readiness. Most recently, we have provided the boards with our new guide containing helpful information for Federal employees entitled "Preparing for Pandemic Influenza." We have asked the boards to include a link to this new guide on their websites, and we have shared information on how agencies at the local level can request additional copies. OPM also helped to facilitate communication between HHS and Federal Executive Boards on the issue of state planning for vaccine distribution. We made sure that our partners at HHS were aware that the boards can be a resource for them as they address Federal agency coordination efforts in the field.

During Fiscal Year 2008, OPM will continue to work with Homeland Security officials and others to ensure that Federal Executive Boards are incorporated into national emergency planning. We would like to see Board Executive Directors devote at least 50% of their time towards pandemic and other emergency preparedness efforts that will assist Federal employees and their families at the regional level.

## **OPM's Response to GAO Recommendations**

Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich, the recent report you both requested from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concerning Federal Executive Boards and their emergency operations role acknowledges much of what I have already described in my statement. The report also makes four recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of these boards which I would like to briefly address.

First, GAO recommends that OPM work with FEMA to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that formally defines the role of Federal Executive Boards in emergency planning and response. In July, my staff met with FEMA staff to discuss this recommendation, and we have agreed to develop an MOU which lays out key functions we believe the boards can perform in support of FEMA's emergency planning and response efforts. We will be consulting with Federal Executive Boards as we work through the technical details of the MOU this fall, with the goal of having a signed document by the end of this calendar year.

Second, GAO recommends that OPM initiate discussion with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other stakeholders to consider the feasibility of integrating Federal Executive Board emergency support responsibilities into the established emergency response framework, such as the National Response Plan. I believe the MOU that we have agreed to establish will provide an appropriate mechanism which will help DHS and specifically FEMA with their framework efforts. We are also reviewing the proposed framework that DHS has recently published, and we will be submitting comments concerning that framework and the role of Federal Executive Boards. In addition, we are working with the White House Homeland Security Council staff to integrate Federal Executive Boards into plans for specific events, like a pandemic influenza.

Third, GAO recommends that OPM continue its efforts to establish performance measures and accountability for the emergency support responsibilities that should be performed by Federal Executive Boards before, during, and after an emergency event affecting the Federal workforce. Currently, the boards report monthly and annually on common activities and outcomes under the two lines of business I referenced earlier in my testimony -- Emergency Preparedness, Security and Employee Safety, and Human Capital Readiness. During the annual board conference in July, we provided basic training on performance measures. However, we agree that more work can be done to develop and standardize performance measures for these activities and we will be working closely with board leadership to ensure we have such a system in place by the end of Fiscal Year 2008 – a system that emphasizes results and accountability.

Finally, as an outgrowth to all of these efforts, GAO has urged OPM to look at funding alternatives that might address the uncertainty some of the boards face with respect to staffing and inconsistent capacity to plan for and respond to emergencies. We are, in fact, exploring with OMB and others in the Administration, such as the President's Management Council (PMC) and the Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) Council, a potential solution that could provide a more permanent funding mechanism for the 28 current Federal Executive Boards. While the mechanics for this proposal are still being discussed within the Administration, we are hopeful for a solution that can address the funding uncertainties identified in GAO's report.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, OPM is proud of the accomplishments of the Federal Executive Boards, especially with the planning and response to emergency situations where lives are at stake and Government services are critical. We will continue to work with the boards and the agencies they serve to better prepare the Federal workforce at the regional level for a possible pandemic influenza, or any other emergency event that might occur. I am happy to answer any questions you or other Subcommittee Members may have regarding my statement.