



**American Red Cross**

**STATEMENT OF JENNIFER PIPA  
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AMERICAN RED CROSS**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**September 29, 2021**

**U.S. SENATE**

Good morning, Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the privilege of testifying before you today on behalf of the American Red Cross. We commend the Committee for holding this much-needed hearing on “Addressing the Threat of Worsening Natural Disasters.”

My name is Jennifer Pipa and I serve as the vice president of Disaster Programs for the American Red Cross. In this role, I oversee our preparedness, response and recovery programs. On behalf of the Red Cross, I want to express our gratitude for this opportunity and am pleased to share our perspective on the challenges we face as a nation in meeting the needs of those impacted by disasters.

As part of the world’s largest humanitarian network, the American Red Cross works on the front lines of the climate change crisis every day. We make a vital difference for families and communities in the U.S. and around the world who are coping with the impacts of this crisis, including more frequent and intense storms, heavier rainfall, extended droughts and devastating wildfires.

Disaster preparedness, response and recovery are at the heart of our mission — and these needs continue to grow, particularly for vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters. Through this lens, we see climate change as a worldwide humanitarian emergency — and a defining threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My testimony today will describe how the Red Cross is actively working alongside partners at all levels, including the federal government, to execute our mission of alleviating human suffering. This includes our role in the National Response Framework, our national response and preparedness programs, and our efforts every day within communities, to ensure those most vulnerable are best prepared.



## **The Mission of the American Red Cross and Our Role in the Lifecycle of a Disaster**

In May, the American Red Cross family marked the 140th anniversary of our founding. Over the course of our 140-year history, Red Cross has adapted to meet the changing needs of the people we serve, but the mission of the Red Cross has remained the same, to prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors. Red Cross volunteers and staff work to deliver vital services every day across America to help individuals, families, businesses and schools be better prepared for life's challenges. Each year the Red Cross responds to more than 60,000 disasters, the vast majority of which are home fires, as well as the recurrences of more extreme-weather events such as wildfires, heatwaves, hurricanes and flooding which we have witnessed in just this last summer. We also collect and provide about 40% of the nation's blood supply; teach nearly 4.5 million people lifesaving skills; and provide more than 513,000 critical support services to veterans, military members and their families annually. Whether the need is large or small, the Red Cross will be there.

Helping make our mission possible are our Red Cross volunteers. Volunteers constitute about 90% of the Red Cross workforce and play critical roles, including preparing and educating families before a disaster, providing aid after disasters and helping families through their recovery. Without these volunteers, we could not respond to the tens of thousands of disasters, both big and small, that occur each year. Whether individuals want to help in their own local community or deploy to large scale disaster relief operations, the Red Cross welcomes new volunteers every single day to deliver our lifesaving mission.

While we are not a federal agency, we have been given certain responsibilities through our Congressional Charter, granted more than 120 years ago. In the ensuing years, the Charter has been amended and in its current form, one of the responsibilities we are charged with is "to maintain a system of domestic and international disaster relief, including mandated responsibilities under the National Response Framework coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)." Under the National Response Framework, we are the co-lead with FEMA for Emergency Support Function 6, which is delineated as Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing and Human Services. We regularly coordinate and collaborate with FEMA to ensure basic needs such as feeding, sheltering and other wrap-around services are available to any disaster-affected person in need under this response framework. In addition to this role, our services expand to include health and mental health support, direct financial support to families, as well as longer term support for affected households and communities.

The partnership between the American Red Cross and FEMA has proven to be extremely effective in helping Americans get through the initial devastation of a large disaster and on the road back to self-sufficiency. Throughout this onslaught of extreme-weather events in the last decade, the Red Cross and FEMA are in constant communication and coordination on issues such as addressing shelter needs, conducting damage assessments, and supporting requests for transitional housing. In addition, any time the Red Cross responds to a disaster, we also work closely with multiple partners in the humanitarian services community to ensure people impacted by natural disasters get the help and resources they need to get back on their feet.

## **Preparedness Programs Meeting the Unique Needs of Disasters Large and Small**

The American Red Cross offers a suite of individual and community preparedness services including our Community Preparedness Education Program, the Youth Preparedness Program,



and the Home Fire Campaign. All of which can engage people in-person or online. Through these offerings, we have reached more than 4 million people each year across the United States, U.S. territories, tribal nations and U.S. military installations abroad since October of 2014.

Through our community preparedness efforts, we offer Be Red Cross Ready trainings to assist individuals and families; Ready Rating to support business and organizational preparedness; and Hands Only CPR, which empowers bystanders to take immediate action in the event of a witnessed, out-of-hospital cardiac emergency. These programs aim to reduce perceived barriers to taking preparedness actions by focusing on a step-by-step approach that is manageable, action-oriented and affordable.

Our age-appropriate youth preparedness programs, including Prepare with Pedro (K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade), and The Pillowcase Project (3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> grade), instruct students about personal and household preparedness and safety skills, local hazard information and resilience building coping skills.

Finally, our Home Fire Campaign combines home fire safety education with the mitigation of smoke alarm installation to ensure that when a home fire occurs, people can receive the alert to a fire in their home and that they know what to do to stay safe.

Every day, seven Americans die in home fires, but sadly many people remain unaware of the danger of these tragedies as they typically don't receive much media attention. With generous support received through a FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Fire Prevention and Safety Grant, the American Red Cross launched the Home Fire Campaign in October 2014.

Each spring, through our *Sound the Alarm* signature events, the Red Cross rallies our volunteers and partners in communities nationwide to provide a focus on home fire prevention and safety. As of August 31, 2021, together with over 4,600 partners, we have accomplished the following:

- Saved more than 1,000 lives
- Installed over 2.2 million smoke alarms, including more than 11,000 bed shaker alarms for people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Served more than 2.4 million people through the program
- Completed almost 950,000 home fire safety visits
- Helped households create over 800,000 home fire escape plans
- Provided services in more than 18,000 cities and towns, including all U.S. territories as well as tribal nations.

We also have the free Red Cross Emergency app, in English and Spanish, that allows users to monitor for more than 35 different severe weather and emergency alerts in their community, and other areas that matter to them. The app also provides lifesaving information to help people prepare their families and households and find open emergency shelters. The app features preloaded content so users can access preparedness and safety guidance from Red Cross experts even without mobile connectivity.

### **Preparedness in the Face of Climate Change**

The increasing rate of climate-driven disasters has become an unsustainable burden on those most vulnerable, notably low-income populations and low-income communities of color, the elderly and people with disabilities. With climate change, what was until very recently an episodic series of acute events has now become a chronic condition of devastating climate impacts —



leaving families and neighborhoods without the opportunity or time to prepare or recover effectively on their own. For example, in 2017, families impacted by Hurricane Irma were struck again that same summer by Hurricane Maria. And in 2020, those in Louisiana first impacted by Hurricane Laura, had barely assessed their damage when they were devastated again by Hurricane Delta.

This chronic situation is only exacerbated by the other struggles disproportionately impacted families face daily: a growing level of income disparity coupled with the challenges of affordable housing, limited access to health care, and inequalities in education. These disparities have left many walking a tightrope — teetering above poverty and homelessness even before disaster strikes. Indeed, most often, the people the American Red Cross serves after large disasters are those who had little resources or safety net prior to the disaster. Of the U.S. households we served following a disaster in fiscal year 2020, 63% had household incomes at or below federal poverty levels.

A few other striking statistics that are currently guiding our readiness and planning efforts, across the United States:

- The number of major climate-related disasters has increased six-fold in the past 40 years.
- Climate disasters with costs exceeding \$1 billion (CPI-adjusted) rose from an average of 2.9 per year from 1980-89, to 12.3 per year in 2010-19, with a record 22 events in 2020.<sup>1</sup>
- By 2030, we anticipate responding to a significant climate emergency every 10 to 12 days — a near-continuous response situation — leaving those we serve in a chronic state of recovery.
- Recent survey results from FEMA indicate that although about 70% of adults have some emergency savings, nearly half of all adults have no more than \$700 in savings on hand.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the ongoing increased pace of disasters, the Red Cross and other disaster response organizations have been challenged with a global pandemic to consider in responding to natural disasters. By understanding the needs created after a disaster and balancing those needs with the ability to keep both the people we serve and our workforce safe, Red Cross worked through alternative housing solutions, and ensured both survivors and our workforce were supported in the safest way possible.

### **Mission Adaption of Services and Business Models to Better Address the Needs of Vulnerable Communities**

In order to meet the needs in the face of increasingly complex and intense environments, technology and innovation are among the top priorities at the Red Cross and have helped our organization remain relevant and effective. A milestone in our disaster response capabilities came with our investment in and implementation of an event management system we call RC View. This platform enables us to augment our own data by drawing upon the almost limitless data sets, models and forecasts from government and nonprofit partners.

We are using these tools to enable our disaster response team to take three important steps. First is to find those who are suffering due to disaster and the intersection of other chronic conditions. Shelter data, rapid damage assessment and call center information are critical tools in finding

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<sup>1</sup> NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (2021).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema\\_2020-national-preparedness-report.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2020-national-preparedness-report.pdf)



those who are suffering, and by integrating this data with social vulnerability data we can provide immediate insights into immediate needs. Second, once we understand the scope of need, we rapidly assess more precisely what those we serve need, where they need it, and when they need it. Through call centers and social media, those who are suffering often tell us exactly what they need. We saw this just this past summer as the communities of southwest Louisiana were reeling from back to back hurricanes, and families were displaced far from their original homes. We were able to react to real time feedback from the call center to both bolster feeding and distribution efforts and more strategically place those resources closest to those in need. Third, we create targeted outreach teams to make sure that those in the most disaster affected and vulnerable areas that we have identified have quick access to Red Cross services in their local neighborhoods. All of this has culminated in the use of technology to better understand when and where high probability/high consequence disasters are likely to occur and to better manage and direct our resources accordingly.

The American Red Cross is working hard to build trust with vulnerable populations. For example, the Latino Engagement Initiative is a program formalized by the Red Cross to better reach vulnerable populations affected by large-scale disasters. The vision is for the American Red Cross to be a trusted, welcomed service provider and organization of choice for the Latino community. By building a standing capability for Latino community engagement within the regional network, the Red Cross is working to build increased trust, greater accessibility to services, enhanced service delivery, and a more empowered and appropriate experience for the people we serve. Likewise, the American Red Cross has established partnerships with trusted advocates in the African American community such as the NAACP, selected historically black fraternities and sororities and faith-based organizations in the African American community.

### **Building and Strengthening Diverse Partnerships to Better Serve Disaster Survivor**

Humanitarian organizations must have a unifying focus and role in serving at-risk and vulnerable populations during times of disaster crisis. The critical points of a relief operation are the initial response which ensures client safety and the recovery program which enables survivors to rebuild their lives. That path to recovery and the barriers to it, is different for each of us and the resources needed must also adapt to ensure we prioritize help for those most vulnerable and for those for whom our equitable care is absolutely critical.

The Red Cross is working together with community leaders, government partners and other relief agencies to address the intricate and disproportionate needs of populations that are impacted. This includes partnering with diverse groups that represent specific communities with unique needs such as access and functional needs, Latinx, LGBTQ, mental health providers, and military service members and veterans. The American Red Cross is committed to investing in our partners to ensure their unique capabilities, demographic focus and inherent racial and cultural sensitivity skillsets are supported and able to provide relief and recovery in partnership with our core mission. The Red Cross values these unique skills and program offerings and understands that recovery requires the work of the whole community to meet the individual needs of people affected by disasters.

We know that to effectively accomplish our mission, we must continue to help everyone left in need by disasters, regardless of their race, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, citizenship status or political affiliation. At a time of intense polarization in our nation, the Red Cross strives to be an example of the diversity of our communities coming together in challenging



times to help all those in need. As American Red Cross President and CEO Gail McGovern has said, “Now, more than ever, we need to care for one another and reaffirm our commitment to diversity by supporting one another.”

While disaster response and recovery activities are always challenging, the Red Cross is committed to working with partners to put disaster survivors first. We will continue to develop internal programs and reach out to dedicated partners to ensure all communities are served during disasters.

### **Conclusion**

The American Red Cross responds to a disaster every eight minutes and works hard to maintain our readiness to respond 24/7. As of this last month, in response to wildfires, floods, hurricanes and our efforts to assist the U.S. military in caring for Afghan evacuees, the Red Cross mobilized nearly 2,900 volunteers. The threat of disasters is increasing, and we must be prepared for the next disaster, not just the ones that have passed.

Again, thank you to this committee for this opportunity to today as you undertake this important examination to ensure Americans are prepared for life-threatening disasters and thank you for allowing the Red Cross to share our perspective and expertise. A recent study published in the *Washington Post* reported that 1 in 3 Americans have faced an extreme weather-related event in this last year, and so many Americans will be facing these endless threats again in the very near future. At the Red Cross, we will continue to fulfill our mission of alleviating human suffering in the face of emergencies and will meet our obligations to provide leadership with our federal and humanitarian partners to address whatever manmade or natural disasters occur. We look forward to partnering with the United States Congress, other branches of government, the faith-based community, nonprofits and for-profits. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.