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**Before the U.S. Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery & Intergovernmental Affairs**

***Understanding the Power of Social Media as a Communication Tool as We Prepare For
and Respond to Disasters***

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Members and staff of the Subcommittee. This is a very timely gathering to address an extremely important subject, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide our perspective.

The recent deadly storms across much of the South and Midwest – as well as the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March – underscore the urgency of working together with government and all our partners to be ready to respond whenever disaster strikes. Social media is playing an increasingly important role in helping people prepare for and respond to emergencies, and we look forward to sharing with you today our experiences with social media in recent disasters.

As you know, the American Red Cross responds to nearly 70,000 disasters each year in communities across the United States. You will find the Red Cross there to help people in need whether they are down the street, across the country or around the world. Our work is made possible by charitable contributions generously donated by the American public, and we strive to be excellent stewards of our donors' dollars.

American Red Cross Survey on Social Media in Emergencies – July, 2010

The power of social media as a communications tool during disasters became clear to us in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti last year. The American Red Cross began receiving tweets from people trapped under collapsed buildings. Haiti lacked a responsive 9-1-1 system and with cell service down in the early hours, people sought help however they could.

Like many other disaster-relief organizations and emergency responders, the American Red Cross didn't have a good way to handle those pleas. We had to go through messages manually and try to route them to the right places. It was a sign to us that disaster response was being changed almost overnight by new technology.

So we decided to convene an Emergency Social Data Summit in August of last year to discuss this issue with other emergency response and disaster relief agencies, as well as the social media entities who were part of this growing phenomenon.

To inform the debate, the American Red Cross conducted a survey of web users, which showed many would turn to social communities to seek help for themselves or others during emergencies. And even more importantly, they expected first responders to be listening.

The online survey, conducted in July 2010, asked 1,058 adults about how they would use social media sites in emergency situations. The survey found that among web users, social media sites are the fourth most popular source for emergency information, just behind television news, radio and online news sites. More web users say they get their emergency information from social media than from a NOAA weather radio, government website or emergency text message system. One in five social media users also report posting eyewitness accounts of emergency events to their accounts.

The survey found that they would also use social media to ask for help. Our survey revealed that if people needed help and couldn't reach 9-1-1, one in five would try to contact responders through a digital means such as e-mail, websites or social media. If web users knew of someone else who needed help, 44 percent would ask other people in their social network to contact authorities, 35 percent would post a request for help directly on a response agency's Facebook page and 28 percent would send a Twitter message to responders.

The Red Cross survey last summer also suggested that Americans have high expectations about how first responders should be answering their requests. For example, 69 percent said that emergency responders should be monitoring social media sites in order to quickly send help—and nearly half believe a response agency is probably already responding to any urgent request they might see.

And the survey respondents expected quick responses to online appeals for assistance—74 percent expected help to come less than an hour after their tweet or Facebook post.

Those were some eye-opening expectations. And we know that they don't match reality.

Another survey, taken just a month before, of members of DomPrep40, an advisory board of disaster response practitioners and leaders, found that 9 in 10 of the respondent groups were not staffed to monitor or respond to requests via social media platforms during major events.

We know that the first and best choice for anyone in an emergency situation is to call 9-1-1. However, as was recently reported in the *Washington Post*¹, 9-1-1 systems are slow to evolve in this digital age. When phone lines are down or the 9-1-1 system is overwhelmed, people will turn to social media.

Emergency Data Summit – August 12, 2010

The Emergency Social Data Summit was convened by the Red Cross on August 12, 2010 in Washington, DC.

¹ "Texting 911, Emergency Line Just Doesn't Get It." Sunday, April 24, 2011, *the Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/texting-911-emergency-line-just-doesnt-get-it/2011/03/28/AF3VKnXE_story.html

More than 150 people attended the all-day Summit to talk about how best we can all engage social media to improve upon disaster preparedness and our collective disaster response. And while 150 were in the building, another 1,200 contributed virtually to the conference via Ustream and Twitter. It was quite a sight to see people live-blogging and tweeting in the same Red Cross Headquarters where people once rolled bandages during World War I.

This gathering marked the first time that government, nonprofit, technology, and citizen sectors came together to discuss the opportunities and challenges we face in integrating social data with disaster response. This hearing today will give these issues even more prominence, and we appreciate your leadership in these discussions.

A wide range of ideas and questions came out of the day-long conference, with seven key questions emerging:

- What can we do to prepare in advance of a crisis?
- Who should have custody of emergency social data? How should it be used?
- Can we codify a solution for routing this data to the proper places?
- What about the issues of accessibility to social media among people with disabilities?
- How do we avoid duplication of effort in responding to pleas for help?
- What is the best way to authenticate requests?
- How do we manage citizen expectations for response?

After the summit, we prepared a document entitled, "The Path Forward." This overview examined some of the issues, opportunities and challenges surrounding each of these questions. I have attached a copy of that document to this testimony.

The questions identified after the Emergency Social Data Summit will not be answered today and will probably not be answered tomorrow. Nevertheless, as your Subcommittee engages in this important conversation about social media in disaster response, they present a good basis for the discussion.

Today, for the purposes of this hearing, I'd like to focus on how the American Red Cross is exploring social tools to assist us in meeting the needs of those affected by disaster.

The American Red Cross and Social Media in a Disaster

For over 130 years, the American Red Cross has continued to operate in a constant cycle of responding to disasters and preparing for the next one. The tools we use to respond to disasters have evolved over the years – but perhaps the most exciting innovations are coming just now as we better understand the opportunities presented by advances in social technologies.

It may seem incongruous for an institution as old as ours to be embracing social media, but our experience teaches us that people in a crisis will communicate the same way they are used to communicating every day. Today, people are communicating with their family and friends on a daily basis through social media, so that is how the Red Cross must communicate. We currently have about 285,000 Facebook fans and 362,000 Twitter followers, and I am proud of the innovative work our team is doing to make social media a valuable part of our 21st century disaster response.

We use these tools to keep the public informed about relief efforts and to offer preparedness tips in real time. When a disaster occurs, we immediately acknowledge the situation by posting

a status update to Facebook, a Tweet, a short video to YouTube, and a post to the Disaster Online Newsroom and our blog. We let our stakeholders know that we will update them with information about our relief efforts as they happen. While there's still much room for improvement, we have honed our standard operating procedures to provide nearly real-time information, action items, and tips.

We train Red Cross volunteers who deploy to disasters to use their smart phones and social technologies. These volunteers create new content from the field to better and more openly share the Red Cross relief efforts.

Mobile technologies and satellite communications are bringing everyone—humanitarian organizations, international institutions, volunteer technical communities, and the affected populations—ever closer together.

Using tools provided by social media partners such as Google Maps, the American Red Cross is collecting and compiling information that we never have been able to collect in the past. We are listening to those affected by disaster and we are sharing updates and information with partners and responders. We are building social media into our operational DNA.

Getting Help

The Red Cross uses these tools to empower our stakeholders to get help or give help.

First, getting help. As indicated in our survey, increasing numbers of people rely on their social community during crises. More often than not, victims of disasters can communicate via text messages, Twitter and Facebook in real time.

We have built a dynamic shelter map using Google maps to update our open shelter information every 30 minutes. We provide this information to the public through a public-facing portal and map on www.redcross.org. We also built an iPhone app so people on the move can access shelter information.

We are in the process of creating an official digital volunteer role that will help monitor, authenticate and route incoming disaster requests and information to other colleagues and partners. This kind of training allows remote employees and colleagues to assist in the disaster response efforts too. Colleagues using hash tags like #crisisdata, #redcross or something similar can collect, collate and respond to queries and concerns from their own homes.

Giving Help

Second, we use social media tools to empower people to give help. Our mobile fundraising efforts have made it easier than ever for donors to make donations with a text. We first saw the power of texting after the earthquake in Haiti when we raised more than \$32 million dollars via text - \$10 at a time. Forty-one percent of donors were under age 34 indicating a new generation was giving, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

We have partnered with Facebook Causes to allow for donations within Facebook, and we've worked with Twitter to make it easy for people to give there, too. We are transparent as possible, give our stakeholders digital tools, and they are easily able to help inspire their own networks to become part of our mission.

Preventing and Preparing for an Emergency

In Haiti, the Red Cross saw 4 million SMS text messages successfully delivered to approximately half a million Haitians as part of the cholera response. Messages covered the symptoms of cholera, treatment and simple steps to prevent it, people learned about preparedness measures, how to clean drainage around their homes to reduce the risk of flooding; and store reserves of water, food and medicine. The campaign also promoted the free Haitian Red Cross recorded information line, which received 400,000 calls.

Domestically, text messages and alert systems allow for citizens to receive aggregate information and news alerts from emergency response agencies and other media outlets. The public can be instantly informed about emergency situations, weather hazards and what actions should be taken to respond to that emergency. These alerts are pushed out further through social media. And citizen reports supplement this information and provide responders with additional situational awareness.

This expansion of warning systems is exemplified in many communities like in King County, Seattle where the Regional Public Information Network keeps the public informed about potential hazards and offers updates on emergency response. The network is also integrated with 9-1-1 and the local fire dispatch log.

Mr. Chairman, as you and your colleagues continue to explore the possibilities of social media, the answers to some of your questions will be found at the local level. We believe a local response is the most effective response because it all begins with individuals, families and communities.

Gaining Situational Awareness

When geodata is included in messages or when pictures are attached to a message – responders learn more about size, scope and necessary response for that location. This can prove to be a valuable tool in damage assessment following a disaster.

This operational data is important in how we approach reporting of sheltering activities. American Red Cross relief operations identify all locations and populations for all shelters and ensure this data is entered into the National Shelter System (NSS) database. The Red Cross NSS information is available through a downloadable application and contains location and capacity information for over 56,000 community facilities (schools, churches, etc.) that have been established as potential shelters across the country. The system records all shelter openings, closings and overnight populations on a daily basis, and is used to guide operational and planning decisions for multiple agencies at all levels. These comprehensive reporting practices and improved access to information allow us to more effectively identify and assess the needs of those affected by disasters as well as provide invaluable resources and information to the public seeking help.

Keeping Families Connected

In the first hours after a disaster strikes, an initial concern is to inform and connect family and friends. The American Red Cross is able to facilitate family communication through its Safe and Well website, found on www.RedCross.org. Here, individuals in affected areas may register their well-being using messages that can be seen by family and friends located outside the disaster area inquiring about their loved one's safety. Disaster victims also may update their Facebook and Twitter status through the Safe and Well website. Additionally, smart phone users may visit www.redcross.org/safeandwell and click on the "List Yourself as Safe and Well" or "Search for friends and family" link.

Correcting Misinformation

During the Summit, those gathered considered the need to authenticate and verify information. There is a balance between acting on information shared through social media outlets and ensuring what is transpired is accurate and correct. Because Red Cross colleagues are watching, tracking and engaging in social media during times of disaster, we are also quick to respond when misinformation is posted. We can often squelch misinformation quickly and decisively as we authenticate and verify information.

Building Resilience

FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate often speaks of his goal to have people see themselves as survivors and not victims of a disaster. "Social media can empower the public to be a part of the response, not victims to be taken care of." Social media enables neighbors to be a first responder to the immediate needs of their neighbors.

In catastrophic disasters we almost always see an abundance of hope from the unaffected – people want to tangibly help. We haven't previously been able to provide limitless valuable roles for these people, but with technology advances there are many opportunities to do just this, turning that abundance of care into more resilient communities, more effective disaster response, and more valuable partnerships.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony today. We are excited to be working with this Subcommittee and your Congressional colleagues to explore the opportunities presented by engaging social media in our disaster preparedness and response.

The American Red Cross is committed to using all the tools of social media to improve our disaster response, but I would like to end with several thoughts:

If there is one thing that we've learned on this recent journey it is that we must continue to embrace change and remain open to new ideas and new platforms. Next year we may not be talking about Facebook or Twitter – but something entirely different. We need to be flexible and nimble.

And, if there's one thing that still must be addressed – it is a discussion of a potential increased role of Federal government. How can government better facilitate use of social media and new technologies to improve upon preparedness and disaster response?

The 2010 Summit participants were passionate about the need for a central, uniform system juxtaposed with *multiple* potential responsible parties including local responders, state agencies, nonprofits and, of course, the Federal government. Much discussion centered around the notion of porting data directly into the 911 system. The technical issues with texting are numerous and would require greater standardization by the entire wireless industry. While such a change could take years, some participants believe that intermediate steps could be taken to more easily share data between various agencies, local government and aid groups.

Finally, technology is a tool, not an end in itself. Our goal is to help alleviate human suffering and ensure that the country is as prepared as possible to respond to any disaster. We will use technology to do that, but it is not about the technology, it is about the people we serve.

Thank you again for your leadership. I am happy to address any questions you may have.