

Testimony of Jane Bullock, Principal, Bullock & Haddow, LLC and former Chief of Staff, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

Ad Hoc Committee on State, Local and Private Sector Preparedness and Integration

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Chairman Pryor, Ranking Member Sununu and distinguished members of the Subcommittee,

I appreciate the opportunity you have given me today to talk about something that is very important to me, to my peers on the panel, to the Congress and, most critically to the American people and that is how we can better serve the American people during times of crisis.

I applaud the Committee for convening this hearing to examine how to ensure we are prepared during a time of change.

I believe I bring a unique perspective to this hearing. I had the privilege of working as a career civil servant in FEMA for 21 years culminating in my position as Chief of Staff to FEMA Director James Lee Witt during the Clinton Administration.

Early in my career at FEMA, I worked in such diverse programs as earthquake preparedness and mitigation, radiological emergency preparedness, and flood insurance and mitigation. In addition, I served as the Director of the Office of Regional Operations and the Director of Public Affairs.

During my tenure as Chief of Staff, I was proud to be a part of Project Impact, the most successful community-based hazard mitigation program ever implemented.

As a career civil servant, I served on the internal FEMA team for Administration transitions in 1988 and 1992 and led the reorganization of the Agency in 1993. As a career Chief of Staff, I led the Agency transition team in 2000.

Throughout my time at FEMA I worked along side of the most dedicated and talented civil servants in the Federal government who, from 1992-2000, successfully responded to over 300 major disasters including the 1993 Midwest Floods, the Northridge Earthquake, Hurricanes Floyd and Fran and the Oklahoma City bombing.

Since leaving FEMA, I have become a member of the Adjunct Faculty at the Center for Crisis, Disaster and Risk Management at the George Washington University and established a consulting business working with Federal, State and local governments, non-profit groups and non-governmental organizations to implement disaster mitigation, preparedness, and response and recovery programs.

But my heart has never really left FEMA.

When you work at FEMA, you can have a dramatic impact on people's lives and during my 21 years at FEMA, the Agency had one of the lowest personnel turnover rates in the entire Federal system.

FEMA is a unique Agency in that it's entire mission is focused on helping the American people to prepare for and mitigate the impacts of a disaster, whether it be a natural disaster or manmade, and when a disaster strikes, to provide support to individuals, families, and communities needed to effectively respond and recover.

However, we always recognized that FEMA cannot achieve this mission on its own. Our ability to succeed was always dependent upon working partnerships with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, non profits and the private sector.

All disasters are local and FEMA has been most effective when it has had the authority and resources to coordinate and direct the Federal government's efforts to support State and local officials before, during and after a disaster strikes.

Unfortunately, I believe the current Administration and the current leadership at the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA do not understand the mission of FEMA or how to best achieve it.

We saw this first in Hurricane Katrina, and now, three years later, after the promise of reform and the talk of a FEMA renewal, we are seeing it again in Hurricane Ike.

As we look forward to the next 12 months, change will be coming to Washington and to the Federal government.

During this period, we could experience any number of disasters including a major earthquake in California, which unfortunately is long overdue, severe winter storms that could disrupt our infrastructure, a major flu outbreak, a major hurricane or another domestic terrorism event.

What can be done in the coming months to ensure that should a major event occur during this time that FEMA and the Federal government will be prepared?

What should be the vision for the future of FEMA in a new Administration?

This Committee has an opportunity in its oversight capacity to have an impact of the future of FEMA and the safety of our citizens from future disasters.

FEMA should be returned to its former status as the world's best emergency management organization focused on customer service, applying an all hazards/risk based approach to emergency management, providing leadership to and working in partnership with State and local governments, and expanding the critical players to include the private sector and the NGO's.

In this context, I would suggest that the following actions need to be taken as we move forward:

- Move FEMA out of the Department of Homeland Security and reestablish it as an Independent Executive Branch agency whose Director reports directly to the President.
- Reinstate the Director of FEMA as a member of the President's Cabinet.
- The next President should appoint a FEMA Director who has a strong relationship with the President and experience in both emergency management and running a government agency. This appointment should be among the very first appointments the President makes.
- Rebuild FEMA's partnership with State and local emergency management organizations – make them full partners at the table and work with them to provide the support, training, exercises and tools they need to enhance their capabilities.
- Reinvest in FEMA's career civil servants and strengthen the role FEMA's Regional career staff play as the first line of defense in preparedness and response.
- Rebuild the Federal Response Plan that designates FEMA as the Agency that directs all Federal response efforts in major disasters in support of State and local governments.
- Invest in hazard mitigation and support community disaster resiliency efforts. A model for such efforts is the highly successful Project Impact: Building Disaster Resistant Communities started in the late 1990's but discontinued by the Bush Administration.
- Expand partnerships to embrace the private sector, NGO's and community- based organizations as full partners in our nation's emergency management activities

Obviously, all of this cannot be accomplished in the next few months but there are practical actions that can be taken to improve our preparedness during this time of change.

There are three areas that I would focus on: 1) rebuilding the State and local partnerships, 2) improving coordination among the Federal agencies and; 3) taking a thoughtful and careful approach to personnel actions during the transition :

**First** I would suggest that the career leadership in each of the FEMA Regions meet together with State emergency management and local emergency managers, where appropriate, to talk about what can be expected from FEMA during this period and how we will work together specifically in the event of a large disaster.

As you have heard from earlier panelists, FEMA has already begun to reach out to their partners but let's request that meetings occur at each Region to ensure that each partner knows what can be expected, what each can bring to the table, and how the coordination will work. This would be an important first step to rebuilding the partnership.

There are varying capabilities at the State and local level. An open and honest dialogue of what the State can expect from the Federal government and what FEMA can count on from the States and

localities will go a long way toward managing the response and managing the expectations of our citizens that may be impacted by a large event.

At the same time, I would strongly encourage that more formal efforts should be made to better understand and form partnerships with the numerous non- governmental organizations (NGO's), non profits and private sector organizations that are now very active in preparedness and response as a result of Katrina. We will need their support and help in a major disaster. But it is important, as with State and locals, to understand what assets they have and how they can be best utilized now, before the disaster strikes.

**Second**, senior career leadership at FEMA Headquarters should convene meetings with their counterparts in other Federal departments and agencies to make sure the coordination and relationships are in place to provide a coordinated and effective Federal response. Under the new Federal Response Framework, the roles and responsibilities of the Federal partners have been blurred and DHS/FEMA has tried to do it all. This has been a major mistake because DHS/FEMA simply does not have the expertise to do it all.

The most effective Federal response mechanism evidenced in the 1990's was based on utilizing the expertise of other Federal agencies, such as the Army Corps of Engineers for logistics, the Department of Energy for power restoration and Department of Agriculture for food stamps, etc. .

FEMA provided the coordination and reimbursement through the Disaster Relief Act.

An immediate step to improve preparedness would be to meet with the Federal partners and establish simple, short term operating agreements as to roles and responsibilities in the event of a large disaster

To be absolutely honest, I believe that, in the event of a disaster, we will see a more effective Federal response because the senior career leadership in FEMA know what needs to be done and will do it without being second guessed or restricted by indecision, cost or political philosophy as we have seen happen under the current political leadership. A political leadership team which have really never understood the dynamics of preparedness, response and recovery and mitigation.

**Third**, I would like to focus on several issues on personnel that are relevant to our ability to be prepared.

I know there has been concern over the numbers of positions at FEMA that remain unfilled. I would like to introduce a note of caution in rushing to fill these positions.

In the rush to fill these positions, we are seeing individuals being selected who may be qualified on paper but lack an understanding of what makes for a successful emergency management organization.

My concern is that FEMA is rushing to hire personnel without carefully thinking of the skills needed to rebuild FEMA.

FEMA has hired many individuals such as ex military and ex Coast Guard personnel who appear appropriate on paper but these disciplines are Federal centric, with a background of always being in charge and acting independently.

These disciplines do not have a lot of experience working with State and local governments. Therefore, they often don't recognize or understand the importance of State and local governments in emergency management and they tend to not listen to their ideas, concerns and needs.

The Constitution assigns public health and Safety to the States. The Disaster Relief Act makes it clear that the Federal government is called in when State and local capacities have been overwhelmed.

A strong and effective National system of emergency management must be built in partnership with State and local governments where the Federal participants play a supplementary and coordinating role, we need senior officials at FEMA who understand and value the importance of the State and local partnership.

During this time of change, another major concern is to ensure that career positions are not being filled by former political appointees from throughout the government who have very limited experience in FEMA related areas.

During the 2000 transition all Federal agencies were required to inform the Congress when a former political appointee was chosen to fill a career position.

I would urge Congress to request the same notification as we proceed through the next months. I think it only appropriate for the Committee to be informed by FEMA on a regular basis the names of any individual or individuals who have been selected for a civil service position who had formerly held a political position within the Administration and their qualifications for the new civil service position. I would suggest such reports cover a period starting from January of 2008.

FEMA is a small agency with a big mission and as such, must be careful to hire only the very best and most qualified to support its mission.

Another issue has arisen relative to the FEMA Regional Directors.

There has been significant discussion of converting the Regional Director position to career civil service, and DHS/FEMA has said it intends to do so as the positions are vacated.

I think this is a major mistake.

As a former Director of FEMA's Office of Regional Operations I have worked closely with FEMA's staff in the Regions. The FEMA Regional structure has always been built around a strong career

Deputy Regional Director and a political Regional Director who can be that critical interface with the political community of Governors, local elected officials, and Members of Congress.

In the 1990s, we found that FEMA's most effective regional directors were those political appointees who had the skills and experience to work in the political world and who were not intimidated by Governor's, Mayor's or other political figures.

Our most successful regional directors provided a needed buffer between the career employees and the political culture as the employees worked to help the American people to prepare for and respond to disasters.

These regional directors developed a level of trust with their career employees that allowed everyone involved to do their job.

I believe the career deputy regional directors can more than adequately manage their regions during the transition time between Administrations but it is imperative that a new group of regional directors be appointed by the President as soon as possible.

One final note on personnel, transitions are times of anxiety for career civil servants. The more the transition process can be open, transparent and involve the career employees, the unions and the organizations that represent the civil service, the smoother that transition and subsequent reorganizations will be. I would hope the Committee through its oversight responsibilities, could encourage the new Administration to endorse such an approach.

During my 21 year career at FEMA, the Agency was most successful when the President and the Congress made it clear that the Federal government has a critical role to play in supporting State and local governments in disaster management.

FEMA was most successful when the FEMA Director had emergency management experience and strong relationship with and direct access to the President and worked in concert with FEMA's dedicated career employees.

Our country's emergency management system was strongest when there was a working partnership among Federal, State and government, the voluntary agencies, NGOs and the private sector.

I strongly believe that the actions I have proposed today can restore FEMA and our Nation's emergency management system to its former status as the best in the world and restore the confidence of the American people that their government will be there to help them when the next disaster strikes.

Thank you.