Testimony of Heather Blanchard, Co Founder of CrisisCommons before the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

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Good morning Chairman Pryor, Ranking Member Brown, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Heather Blanchard, and I am a co-founder of CrisisCommons, a volunteer technology community that connects people and organizations who use open data and technology to innovate crisis management and global development. Before this position, I spent seven years at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, including Deputy Director of the Ready Campaign. On behalf of our community, it is a true honor to testify before you today. When a crisis occurs, it isn't emergency responders who are first on the scene. It's everyday people who use everyday resources like their mobile phone and social networks to share what they know. This could be a road blocked by a tree after a storm or creating a map of where they see wildfires. Today, there are many volunteers who leverage technology, like CrisisCommons, that can direct technical capacity, harness open data and collaborative tools to help first responders and communities make sense from the deluge of information that occurs in a crisis. We believe that information at the right time and right place can help response authorities and citizens make better decisions especially in a crisis.

Since the spring of 2009, CrisisCommons has been an open forum to explore how information, including social media, can help in a crisis. Our community has supported organizations and citizens in the response to the Haiti and Japan earthquakes, Tennessee floods,

and last week's historic tornados which impacted the south east. Just to share an example, during the blizzard which paralyzed Chicago this year, our volunteers through CrisisCampChicago in collaboration with Humanity Road supported the Chicago Tribune Snow Map to assure that public requests for assistance were routed to 311 and other local authorities. One challenge we often see is that government agencies simplify the use of social media as a public affairs function when in fact, during a crisis, access to citizen-generated information is an operational necessity. As an example, this year during our support for the National Level Exercise the situational awareness workgroup that we participated in struggled to define how social media information would be coordinated from an operational perspective as there is not a resourced function which connects open data, including social media, and leverages potential surge capacity from communities like CrisisCommons. We would like to recommend to the committee that government create an operational liaison function which connects volunteer technology communities to our response systems at the Federal, State and local levels and be resourced for support during steady state and in crisis events. We recommend that current emergency management doctrine be revised to include the capability to harness technology volunteer expertise and collaborative systems.

Another challenge we have observed, is that in local Emergency Operations Centers the connection between social media information and operations is largely absent. We were shocked to find that some centers lacked high bandwidth Internet, technical skills or collaborative tools. We were also dismayed to find that many agencies have stringent security policies blocking their workforce from using social media tools for operational purposes. Without this capability emergency managers could be missing critical information in their operational picture. We recommend that emergency management infrastructure be fully modernized. We also

recommend that policy and incident management doctrine be modified to allow emergency management personnel to engage outside of their own organizational networks to take advantage of social media tools and capabilities.

As you can see, emergency management is not prepared to utilize social media tools and data to augment their operations and inform their mission priorities. When there is a crisis, emergency management continuously find themselves overwhelmed with information. We recommend that resources be devoted towards helping emergency managers with data preparedness and filtering, increasing the level of digital literacy of the emergency management workforce and empowering their ability to connect with technology support.

In looking at the government's role in this ecosystem, the days of agencies passively sitting on the social media sidelines from behind the firewall are over. The time has come to evolve to a more open and participatory crisis management model. We believe that the Federal government has a leadership role to play but again, we feel that institutional support is needed to move us to the next level. To emphasize we recommend the following:

- Create an operational liaison function to coordinate with volunteer technology communities
- Revise policy and incident management doctrine to incorporate social media and other technology capabilities
- Invest in modernization of emergency management infrastructure and collaborative tools
- Support data preparedness and filtering, increasing the level of digital literacy of the emergency management workforce and empowering their ability to connect with technology support.

In spite of these challenges, we know of many emergency managers who are pushing the envelope everyday, sometimes at a professional risk, to apply social media tools and data in their

work. We are supportive of enlightened leadership that Administrator Fugate displays everyday. He has opened the door to discussion and experimentation that we see today. However, individuals cannot change institutional challenges by example. Today we are asking for your help to support the needed enhancements that emergency management needs to fully utilize social media information and providing connectivity to communities who can support their efforts like CrisisCommons.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.