

Written Statement of

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FEMA

“Hurricane Ike Recovery Efforts in Texas”

Before the

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Committee on Homeland Security, Governmental Affairs
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Introduction

Good morning Chairwoman Landrieu, Ranking Member Graham, and other distinguished Members of the Committee. It is my privilege to appear before you today on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As always, we appreciate your interest in and continued support of our emergency management mission.

My name is Brad Harris, and I served as the Federal Coordinating Officer for the Hurricane Ike Recovery Effort in Texas from Feb 4, 2009, until the operation was transitioned to our Region VI office in Denton, Texas on Sept, 4, 2009. I am pleased to be here today to update you on our Hurricane Ike recovery efforts, and to discuss regional readiness to ensure that we can successfully respond to another event of similar magnitude.

On Sept. 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike made landfall in Texas as a strong Category 2 hurricane, inundating portions of Texas with a storm surge and causing damage and displacement of families across the southeastern portion of Texas and the southwestern Louisiana coast. FEMA initiated response operations in partnership with the State of Texas, our federal agency partners, and volunteer organizations to set the stage for our simultaneous implementation of response and recovery programs.

Within seven weeks of landfall, FEMA's recovery programs and efforts had registered over 700,000 survivors for disaster assistance, completed almost 360,000 inspections of homes damaged, implemented a temporary housing program, and disbursed more than \$326 million in disaster assistance funds to survivors for housing or other disaster-related needs. Over 16.6 million cubic yards of debris had already been

cleared, and over \$15 million in low-interest loans had been disbursed by our Small Business Administration partners. On December 12, 2008, FEMA launched the Hurricane Ike web site that provided the latest recovery information, updated daily, on Individual and Public Assistance programs.

While we are proud of our accomplishments in the recovery mission thus far, we recognize that there is still much work that needs to be done to meet the needs of the survivors and communities that were devastated by Hurricane Ike. I am confident that we will complete our mission by continuing to work closely with our state, local, and federal partners, and by continuing to build on what we have collectively achieved over the past year.

One Year Later: Accomplishments of the Federal, State, and Local Partnership

Having provided the committee with a summary overview of FEMA Hurricane Ike recovery efforts undertaken to date, I will now review our actions to date in greater depth. Immediately after landfall, FEMA, in concert with our federal, state, county, local, and volunteer partners, implemented emergency sheltering operations and programs for individuals and families who evacuated from the affected areas. The Transitional Sheltering Assistance program assisted nearly 35,000 Texans. This allowed FEMA to pay for eligible expenses incurred for hotels/motels, or incidentals, in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Simultaneously, FEMA implemented its Temporary Housing program, using a combination of manufactured homes and rental apartments. FEMA's primary form of housing assistance is to provide funds to disaster survivors to rent alternate accommodations. FEMA works with the state to locate available residential properties

that individuals can use temporarily if they are displaced from their damaged dwelling. After FEMA provided initial rental assistance to eligible households, FEMA worked in partnership with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to implement the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) on a pilot basis to carry forward the housing assistance. Overall, more than 21,000 families were housed under DHAP, and there are currently over 12,000 families still participating in DHAP.

For areas in which rental resources are not available, FEMA utilizes manufactured housing units. The first manufactured home was on the ground ready for occupancy within 18 days of Ike's landfall. Ultimately, over 3,720 temporary housing units were put in place and occupied. FEMA's highest priority remains the health and safety of the disaster survivors. In 2008, FEMA developed new, strict performance specifications for travel trailers, park models, mobile homes, and alternative housing units, with input provided to the Joint Housing Solutions Group (JHSG) from industry experts, the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Health Affairs. Included in these new specifications are requirements to eliminate the use of formaldehyde emitting materials; maintain continuous air exchange; venting and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems that meet HUD standards and; test air quality in units to ensure levels are below .016 parts per million. This effort represents the agency's continuing commitment to identify a variety of safe housing solutions to supplement the array of solutions available to best meet the complex, disaster-related housing needs of states.

FEMA also issued a grant to the State of Texas to provide disaster case management in order to further assist disaster survivors with their recovery efforts. As an indicator of individual recovery, in less than one year since landfall, 1,595 (43 percent) of those temporary housing units have been vacated and returned to the federal inventory as survivors have returned to their re-built homes or to other more permanent residences. FEMA along with the State and HUD will continue to assist the 1,964 households that remain in the temporary housing units find permanent housing solutions.

With an eye to the future, FEMA also utilized a pilot program to place several alternative temporary housing units at one of our community sites to assess the viability of the units. We are encouraged by our initial evaluation of the use of these units.

FEMA also explored an alternative approach to providing disaster housing through the Rental Repair Pilot Program, which Congress authorized as part of the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA). This authority, which expired at the end of 2008, allowed FEMA to test and evaluate the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of coordinating and funding the timely repair of damaged multifamily dwellings, such as apartment complexes. A pilot was conducted in Galveston, Texas, as an alternative form of providing housing assistance, and the results of the pilot will assist in determining if such a capability should be permanently added to our recovery tools.

In the area of Public Assistance (PA), FEMA also took steps to streamline community recovery programs during our response to Hurricane Ike. Shortly after landfall, FEMA established a toll-free telephone number for local and county officials who needed additional, detailed information regarding our Public Assistance program. This toll-free number was staffed by senior Public Assistance Program Specialists, and

we fielded more than 200 calls and queries regarding PA eligibility and contracting requirements. We believe this capability afforded local officials the ability to make timely and informed decisions about their recovery operations, and based on our experience, it will be a resource we can implement in future disaster operations.

In coordination with local governments and the State of Texas Government Land Office, FEMA assisted in the reimbursement of costs related to removing debris from oyster and shrimp beds in Galveston and Trinity bays. Several small, individually owned fishery businesses benefitted from this process, which in turn helped maintain and preserve a \$60 million per year industry. As a result of our streamlined initiatives to assist and reimburse local governments for debris removal, local governments instituted local debris removal programs that helped to speed-up the recovery process. In fact, Hurricane Ike represented the first major disaster operation in which 100 percent of the debris removal contracts were managed by the local governments; debris was cleared quickly and effectively, encouraging the return of residents and business.

So far, under the auspices of FEMA's PA program, thousands of Project Worksheets (PW) have been completed to help reimburse state, county, and local governments as well as private non-profit organizations to recover and rebuild. As of Sept. 4, 2009, our Public Assistance team has written 13,939 PWs. The regional office anticipates that the remainder will be written before the end of this calendar year. The reimbursements of our public partners served to assist recovery substantially at the local level. During the 12-week period from June 4 through the end of August 2009, FEMA completed an average of 284 PWs and obligated over \$32 million per week to the State of

Texas. This funding could in turn become available to county and local governments for repairs to infrastructure, thus defraying the costs of recovery.

Under FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Program, our team remains committed to working closely with our State partners to assist with the review, implementation, and consideration of several mitigation programs that will enhance recovery efforts. Projects currently under consideration include buy-outs of certain residential properties which may be in floodways or velocity zones and construction initiatives to further harden and storm-proof structures critical to the local infrastructure. Currently, the buy-out proposal for the Bolivar Peninsula includes over 800 homes, which is the largest buy-out effort in Region VI history. However, proposed projects must meet certain criteria. These criteria are designed to ensure that the most cost-effective and appropriate projects are selected for funding.

Remaining Challenges to Texas Recovery One Year Later

In the year since Hurricane Ike came ashore, FEMA has worked aggressively with its partners to meet the recovery needs of individuals and families who survived the storm, and to help state and local government entities recover and rebuild. However, as I mentioned before, because of the magnitude of Hurricane Ike's destruction, there are many challenges that still remain. According to the Insurance Information Institute, Hurricane Ike was the third most expensive hurricane on record in U.S. history, causing significant damages to thousands of homes as well as to local infrastructure. While we have made great strides in assisting the recovery process, the job is not yet finished.

Individual Assistance

The devastation and destruction that follows disasters and catastrophic events can result in significant disruption to families and their communities. One of the most difficult aspects of the recovery process related to families is disaster housing. Placing significant numbers of eligible applicants in temporary housing units in a timely manner presents a real challenge. The placement of units must comply with applicable State and local codes and ordinances as well as guidelines pertaining to floodplain management and protection of wetlands, and other environmental considerations. Although some applicants were in FEMA mobile homes or park model trailers within three weeks, it took over a few months to get the last applicant in a unit, during which time FEMA assisted rental or transitional sheltering assistance for eligible applicants. These challenges intensify in catastrophic disasters where large populations require temporary housing. FEMA continues to work with the State and local governments to clarify roles and responsibilities in an effort to expedite this process and help eliminate delays in assistance to individuals who need it.

FEMA also learned that the pace of recovery efforts in areas most significantly impacted by Hurricane Ike created a shortage of available and competent licensed construction contractors. We have learned that in some cases, individual home owners have been informed by rebuilding contractors that it may be months before some contractors can begin repair of a home. The concern is that a lack of contractors may inhibit an individual's ability to adequately repair his or her home before the end of the housing program.

We recognize that these factors can delay an individual's recovery, which, in turn, may delay when they can leave a temporary housing unit and return to their homes. This

presents a challenge for FEMA but accentuates the need to further improve intergovernmental, interdepartmental, and interagency cooperation and communication. By working with the State and HUD, and with the local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), we are maintaining an up-to-date database and snapshot of rental resources that become available in proximity to the areas most significantly damaged. We are continuing to encourage survivors to accept other forms of longer-term housing, such as apartments through DHAP, administered by HUD. Our Individual Assistance team will stay in communication with those individuals and families who remain in temporary housing units to help in the rebuilding process or to assist them in their efforts to locate more permanent housing.

Public Assistance

The scale of the damage that resulted from Hurricane Ike continues to present specific and complex challenges. As an example, the damages incurred at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston covered several properties, including 157 buildings and critical facilities, such as emergency rooms and laboratories. As of September 4, FEMA had completed PWs detailing 277 of these repair projects and had reimbursed approximately \$150 million of eligible expenses. The remaining PWs are complicated and many require architectural drawings for the construction and this process will take some time. Architects are currently busy with the planning and design for new buildings as well as design construction for the existing structures that were damaged. Our PA teams have an excellent working relationship with officials at UTMB, and continue to streamline processes to help that critical medical facility move toward full recovery. While efficiency is important and has improved, it is also critical to ensure

that FEMA remains accountable to the taxpayer. FEMA ensures this by making sure that all PW's are reviewed by our Public Assistance Officers as well as other areas of review such as environmental, insurance and State review prior to obligation. The management of UTMB is satisfied with our support and understands that this complex recovery mission will take longer than we all anticipated. UTMB has our commitment that we will work with them until the last eligible PW is written. To help speed the process, FEMA has implemented new initiatives that allow us to complete PWs and make obligations more quickly. Such initiatives include the creation of an interagency debris task force with debris specialists to assist with gathering information to help expedite PW preparation and processing. FEMA also reorganized staff to set up specialized PA teams with specific experience in effort to focus on PWs for applicants such as UTMB, the Electrical Cooperatives and eligible Private Non- Profits Organization. As a result, we will be able to reimburse UTMB more promptly to assist in their recovery, as opposed to awaiting a "final" disposition on that facility in its entirety.

Hazard Mitigation

For some homeowners, rebuilding may no longer represent a viable option. In some instances, their home was placed at the waterfront, or in a geographical location identified as a severe flood or water velocity zone. We are aware that several cities or counties are still deciding whether to allow rebuilding in those zones. Among the issues these cities may be considering are a revision of local building codes to require elevation, the impact on community status in the National Flood Insurance Program of rebuilding in those areas, or restrictions required under the Coastal Barrier Resources Act.

Other long-range challenges include implementation or selection of hazard mitigation projects designed to help lessen the potential of damages or losses from the next major hurricane or storm. Almost all of the designated counties have FEMA-approved local mitigation plans in place, making them eligible for mitigation assistance. In the year since Ike hit, the State of Texas has secured approximately 20 mitigation grants from FEMA for new mitigation plans to fill gaps in areas that do not currently have planned mitigation strategies. FEMA is working with the state to seamlessly fold technical assistance for mitigation planning into its expanding partnership with the state.

We acknowledge that a decision to implement particular projects, such as a buy-out of homes or private property, sometimes requires prolonged study, discussion, and consensus at several levels. Our hazard mitigation team is working aggressively with our state and local government partners to identify and select those projects that will serve to enhance recovery and reduce the impact of any future event.

Region VI: Capable and Ready to Handle Disasters

Following all major disasters, FEMA transitions its recovery efforts from our Joint Field or Transitional Recovery Offices to our regional offices across the nation to ensure continuity of operations. The extensive recovery effort for Hurricane Ike, led by Region VI, has gone well. Local elected officials have been supportive and appreciative of FEMA's efforts, and local officials and the general public have been constantly informed on issues as they develop. Our Region VI office has an experienced staff and excellent relations with the State of Texas.

I am confident the Region can effectively respond to new disasters while continuing to meet the needs of the communities affected by Hurricane Ike. Past performance bolsters my confidence in the Region's ability to multitask; in just the last two years, from January 2008 through the present, Region VI successfully managed 78 disaster-related events. During this period, all five states in the Region VI area of responsibility were affected. These events included 21 major disaster declarations for floods, storms, tornadoes and hurricanes, 50 Fire Management Assistance declarations and seven emergency declarations.

Conclusion

FEMA is pleased with what we have been able to accomplish with the help of our state, local, and federal partners since Hurricane Ike made landfall one year ago. But we recognize that there is still more work to do – and it cannot be done alone. I am confident that we can complete this short-term recovery mission by continuing to remain actively engaged with local officials, the State of Texas and our Federal partners.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. We look forward to working with the Committee as we continue to build toward recovery here in Texas. I am prepared to answer any questions you may have.