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**TESTIMONY OF ARMOND MASCELLI
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**Before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee,
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery**

Chairwoman Landrieu, Senator Graham and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you on behalf of the American Red Cross. The 2009 hurricane season has begun, and I appreciate this opportunity to share with you and your colleagues some details of our ability to respond to the challenges that may face the American public during these coming months.

For more than 125 years, the American Red Cross has provided relief to victims of disaster and helped families and individuals prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies. As you may know, our Congressional Charter mandates that the Red Cross carry out a system of national and international relief. Each day, we meet our mission through a national network of more than 700 chapters that respond to over 70,000 disasters annually – about 200 disasters a day. From single family house and apartment fires to large scale disasters like hurricanes, the Red Cross works to provide essential life saving and sustaining services to those in need. We shelter, feed, provide critical supplies and emotional support to those impacted by disasters in communities across our country. Our work relies heavily on the generous contributions of the public – including donations of time, money and blood.

Red Cross volunteers and staff are on the front lines when emergencies occur in their communities. Our national system builds upon our local presence to supplement staff and to provide additional resources. Together, we offer immediate emergency assistance to those in need during disasters of all sizes. While the system is not always perfect, our organization is committed to delivering the best possible service, and we strive to continuously improve our operations and services.

Today, I will report on our preparations for the upcoming hurricane season, will explain how we are operating in a more cost-efficient manner, will outline some areas of concern, and will again reinforce the need for the country to be better prepared.

Preparing for the 2009 Hurricane Season

The 2009 hurricane season began just a few days ago on June 1, and preparation is of great importance not just to hurricane prone states, but to the entire country. We appreciate your attention to this subject and are grateful to our colleagues and partners who are working together with us to help the country prepare.

Our organization operates in a constant cycle of responding to disasters and preparing for the future. The Red Cross – at the local and national levels – regularly participates in activities to build capacity, partner, plan, prepare, exercise and evaluate our capabilities. We periodically review and, when necessary, refine our roles and responsibilities. Spring is a critical time of the year, as we are typically responding to tornadoes and floods at the same time that we are preparing for the potential demands of the upcoming hurricane season.

In preparation for hurricane season, we carefully analyze data and project potential needs for shelters, food, personnel and other operational functions in times of large scale disasters. To meet expected needs, material resources have been pre-positioned in warehouses across the country for easy access and prompt mobilization. We have also completed a detailed assessment of our communications equipment inventory and have verified and pre-positioned our nationwide disaster fleet of more than 300 vehicles. This fleet includes emergency response vehicles, communications vehicles, tractors, trailers and utility vehicles.

Note, also, that the National Shelter System (NSS), which tracks potential shelter locations and capacities, is populated with up-to-date data. It now contains location and capacity information for over 55,000 buildings that could potentially be used as shelters across the country. The system, used for both planning and operational decisions, records all shelter openings, closings and overnight populations on a daily basis. The NSS is available to FEMA and to all states free of charge and it is currently being used by 12 additional national non-government partners.

Staffing of relief operations is also a critical function that requires advanced planning. While we focus on use of local volunteers whenever possible, we now have more than 50,000 trained volunteers who are available to travel outside of their home communities. These disaster workers are trained for specific jobs, and we are now in the process of assessing their availability for disaster assignments during the upcoming season. Including locally available disaster-trained volunteers, we have more than 90,000 volunteers – which is a considerable increase from the 23,000 that were available prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Working with Federal and State Partners

While service delivery happens at the local level, it is supported by a national system. Our disaster field structure is aligned by state and provides a point of contact and integration of plans with Federal, state and local officials across the nation. Since Hurricane Katrina (and in part as a result of several after-action reports – including one by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs), the American Red Cross has focused more resources on coordination with Federal, state, and local government.

With support from FEMA, we have recently brought on full-time Red Cross employees to staff each of the ten FEMA regional offices and the two area offices in the Caribbean and Pacific. We also have one full-time representative to the National Disaster Housing Task Force and two additional full-time staff to represent our organization at FEMA National Headquarters. We are also active participants in FEMA's video teleconferences (VTCs). This increased presence has improved coordination and is strengthening key relationships with our Federal partners.

Just as our chapters have different strengths and weaknesses, we recognize that states also vary in their responses. Hurricanes do not observe borders and it can sometimes become a challenge when we are responding to a multi-state disaster. With this in mind, the Red Cross has worked to facilitate conversations among representatives of the hurricane prone states with the goal that we can all learn from one another. Creating this interaction now will help us work toward our common goal – providing a safer environment before, during and after a hurricane.

This year, the Red Cross is participating in conferences that focus on the abilities and needs of each of the hurricane prone states (from Texas to Maine, plus the Pacific region) to ensure coordination during an event. These meetings provided a forum to identify challenges and opportunities. For example, the Red Cross and the State of Louisiana are working toward a single, unified sheltering plan. Discussions are continuing with the state's Department of Social Services and the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness about mutual logistics, general population shelters and critical transportation needs.

We also have engaged Federal and state government in training exercises focused on hurricane response. Recently, we participated with the state of Florida in a major hurricane exercise and with FEMA on a day-long tabletop exercise to model a category 4 hurricane making landfall in Savannah, GA. In addition, we participated in a Cabinet-level hurricane exercise.

We also want to acknowledge South Carolina's aggressive hurricane planning efforts. Extensive planning takes place each year with all of the sheltering stakeholders to identify and pre-select shelters for use during a hurricane evacuation. The Red Cross works closely with the state, particularly the Department of Social Services (DSS). DSS staff actively support shelters run by the Red Cross in the state, and the Red Cross works closely with DSS to provide training to its staff. The Hurricane Plan is also tested annually through exercises or in response to a storm in South Carolina, such as Tropical Storm Hanna last September.

Collaborating with Nongovernment Partners and the Private Sector

Identifying new partnerships and strengthening existing partnerships continues to be a strong priority for our organization. We are working to be a stronger facilitative partner and leader in disaster, not just with other voluntary agencies already engaged in disaster, but also in welcoming and supporting newer, non-traditional disaster response organizations. We recognize that groups that possess a particular critical expertise, community trust, or credibility can greatly expand and improve a community's response. Organization-wide, we are committed to fostering a culture of collaboration, diversity and inclusion in our partnering efforts.

On the local level, chapters partner with community, faith-based and civic organizations. We also have stepped up efforts to ensure that community 2-1-1 organizations have current disaster information. On a national level, we continue to rely on our long standing partners in disaster, such as the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, The Salvation Army, and Catholic Charities. In addition, we are cultivating and strengthening more diverse partnerships with groups like HOPE *worldwide*, the NAACP, Legal Services Corporation and Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation. We work closely with disability rights groups, immigration rights groups, and language interpretation and translation groups such as the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, the National Virtual Translation Center, the National Council of La Raza, National Disability Rights Network, Save the Children, and tribal organizations. Our work with pet rights groups such as the U.S. Humane Society has also been important. All of these groups provide invaluable expertise to help clients, in particular diverse clients and those with unique needs.

Together with our partners, we can continue to strengthen the country's capacity to better serve and meet the needs of our very diverse communities.

Serving in a Cost-Effective Manner

Over the past decade, response to major disasters has changed dramatically. FEMA and other Federal agencies have made substantial changes as a result of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, changes to the Stafford Act and the progression from the Federal Response Plan (FRP) to the National Response Plan (NRP) and to the National Response Framework (NRF). Similarly, the Red Cross has evolved and is continually working to improve our processes and to identify ways to deliver service in a more cost-effective manner.

In economic downturns, the needs of the most vulnerable are magnified by disaster. This is occurring at the same time that donations to charitable organizations are decreasing. Like many nonprofit organizations that depend on the generosity of donors, we have been faced with financial challenges. The major disasters of 2008 – such as wildfires in California, flooding in the Midwest, and hurricanes Gustav and Ike – created expenses that far outpaced contributions. We are fortunate that our organization received support from Congress to reimburse some of these expenses. For the coming year, we are working toward a balanced budget that includes program changes to reduce expenses and an aggressive focus on fundraising.

In late 2008, we made some changes to our service delivery program that we are continuing this year. FEMA's provision of "Other Means Assistance," which includes emergency financial assistance, allowed the Red Cross to commit more resources to our core mission – sheltering, feeding and distributing emergency bulk items and supplies. The Red Cross is now providing an increased focus on one-on-one casework, is performing more detailed client needs assessments, and is placing a greater emphasis on distributing supplies to meet emergency needs. Overall, this has maximized use of partners, reduced costs, and created a better volunteer and client experience. We will continue to monitor the program closely this year and will make adjustments as needed.

Another step to reduce costs while maintaining service levels is a strong and continued emphasis on use of local volunteers. While some larger disasters will obviously require

movement of volunteers using our national Disaster Services Human Resources system, use of volunteers from in and around the local area is always the first choice.

Identifying Areas of Concern

In May 2008, the Red Cross testified before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and stated that tremendous work remained to be done in order to properly prepare our nation for response to very large scale disasters. While much progress has been made in the past year, this statement is still true. Now, as before, no major metropolitan area is adequately prepared.

Working with our government partners and nongovernmental agencies, we have considered and exercised worse case scenarios such as a hurricane hitting New York. The results have clearly indicated that it will require the totality of resources across NGOs, all levels of government, private sector, and citizens themselves in order to mount an effective response. The American Red Cross remains committed to working to close the gap between our country's collective capabilities and the threats posed by potential catastrophic disasters – many of which could far exceed the destruction caused by the storms of 2005.

One such scenario would be a sizeable public health emergency such as an emergence of a more virulent strain of the recent H1N1 Influenza outbreak. This is an area of concern on multiple levels: it poses a significant risk as a public health threat, and it could create tremendous complications if an area suffering from an outbreak were also to experience a major natural disaster. In particular, an outbreak could have an impact on the safety and availability of congregate shelters. While the Red Cross looks to local and state public health officials for guidance on the safety and advisability of opening congregate shelters, we need to work diligently to identify solutions that protect both workers and clients while also providing adequate levels of service. Worker guidelines and worker protections are significant considerations in our approach.

Encouraging Community and Citizen Preparedness

Individuals and families across this nation can continue to rely upon the American Red Cross to deliver our promise – providing for emergency needs in times of disaster. However, the system of relief will not work well without continued emphasis on community and personal preparedness. A recent survey showed that approximately 68% of individuals and families have not made an emergency communications plan and 79% have not identified a meeting place should family members become separated during a disaster.

The American Red Cross offers various tools and resources to help citizens become better prepared for an emergency. These programs are designed for specific types of disasters – including hurricanes – and we encourage communities and citizens to become more aware of potential disasters that could adversely impact their regions and to prepare accordingly.

We have learned over the past several years that conveying a single national message of preparedness is critical. Our “Be Red Cross Ready” campaign, which parallels the Department of Homeland Security’s Ready Campaign, offers three important steps: (1)

Get a Kit; (2) Make a Plan; and (3) Be Informed. We respectfully request your support and endorsement of a single national preparedness message.

Despite the best efforts of many organizations, including our Federal and state partners, there has been little improvement in citizen and community preparedness. Encouraging preparedness now will help build resilient communities for the future.

Conclusion

Chairwoman Landrieu, Senator Graham and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony as we enter the 2009 hurricane season. As we have outlined, our organization is committed to working in earnest to be as prepared as possible for the coming hurricane season – as well as for any other disaster that may strike. We are also working hard to improve efficiencies, and to increase individual and community preparedness. We would greatly appreciate any support you can offer in helping to spread this important message.

As we move into the 2009 hurricane season, we are excited to be working with FEMA's strong leadership team, with FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate, and with the leadership in the Executive Branch. As our nation's largest mass care provider, we stand ready to work with our partners in government, in the nonprofit sector, and in the private sector to ensure that the country is as prepared as possible to respond.

I am happy to address any questions you may have.