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TESTIMONY

**Before the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on
Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs**

2011 Spring Storms: Picking Up The Pieces and Building Back Stronger

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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Pryor and distinguished members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today relating to “Picking Up the Pieces and Building Back Stronger” after the 2011 Spring Storms. This is a critical topic, and the storms and floods that have devastated parts of the South and Midwest in recent months have certainly been felt in Arkansas.

The Arkansas Department of Emergency Management (ADEM) has experienced numerous challenges over the past few years, including 11 Federal Declarations since 2008. Our agency is tasked with disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery of the State of Arkansas. The lessons that we have learned over the years from responding to these and other disasters have been invaluable to our efforts to prepare Arkansans for future disasters. The Arkansas Department of Emergency Management is committed to utilizing these lessons as we re-examine our plans and procedures to helping our citizens “pick up the pieces and build back stronger.”

We continue to share the vision of Governor Mike Beebe which is to coordinate resources, expertise and leadership for mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery while protecting the lives, environment and property of the people of Arkansas.

The ADEM provides 24/7 coverage and stands ready to respond to the state in the event of a natural or man-made emergency or disaster. We work daily with our colleagues in counties, state agencies, federal agencies and volunteer agencies coordinating a myriad of programs, education and activities to better prepare our state for the next emergency.

The various programs must stand ready to evolve as new information and lessons are learned. Our rapid adaption to Social Media is but one example.

While I am extremely proud of the ADEM, we all know that it takes all of our partners to have the response that our citizens expect. The spring flooding was record setting in many cases and near record setting in others. For the first time in history Interstate 40 between Little Rock and Memphis had to be shut down because of flooding. The joint effort between the Arkansas Highway and Transportation, Arkansas State Police, local law enforcement, the Arkansas National Guard and others made the difficult detours work. A joint effort between the local levee board, the County Judges, Sheriffs, Mayors, National Guard soldiers, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission staff, Arkansas Forestry Commission staff, Army Corps of Engineers, volunteer agencies and the Department of Emergency Management kept a possible catastrophic failure of the levee from occurring on the Mississippi River Levee system in southern Arkansas.

FEMA has been with us all the way. We had near constant communication with FEMA Region VI. A Region VI liaison was quickly assigned to the State Emergency Operations Center to ensure seamless coordination of information and any needed federal resources. After the disaster was declared by the President a Joint Field Office was quickly established and disaster assistance began flowing to those affected by the disasters. The trust established between the Federal

Coordinating Officer and ADEM enabled Arkansas to make the important decision to continue our long planned participation in the 2011 National Level Exercise. With this partnership and trust we were able to take full advantage of the exercise to continue improvement in preparations for a New Madrid seismic event as well as manage the ongoing disaster.

It is also important to note that the close coordination between those many agencies at the Local, State and Federal levels would not have been possible without the Arkansas Interoperable Communication Network. This interoperable communication system would not have been possible without the State Homeland Security Grant Program. With this system, we were able to ensure sandbags arrived at the proper place at the proper time. Communication between those locating sand boils on levees could quickly communicate the size and location to get sandbags, workers, heavy equipment or other needed resources to the scene to quickly stabilize the levee and prevent the need for massive evacuations. I stress that this would not have been possible without the grant program.

Planning and preparing for disasters or emergencies does not happen the day of the event—it is a daily challenge. As new hazards appear, ADEM must be prepared to provide leadership in preparedness efforts. Partnerships are formed and collaborative efforts are employed in an on-going commitment to saving lives and protecting property. I offer the following examples:

Mitigation Program Success Stories

West Memphis

I want to share with you today details about the highly successful Auburn Avenue Acquisition in West Memphis, Arkansas. FEMA purchased and then demolished 18 houses located on the north side of Auburn Street, a flood-prone area. Here is why the project happened: The depreciated value of these houses due to past flooding had convinced the city that any structural improvements would only have a “Band-Aid” effect. All of the homes were built on slabs, making them poor candidates for elevation. Additionally, the clay/gumbo soil in the area was not conducive to elevation. Overall, this project eliminated 18 repetitive loss properties and reduced costs to the National Flood Insurance Program, the city of West Memphis, and the residents in that area who had to buy flood insurance. Purchase and demolition proved much more economically feasible than to keep applying those Band-Aids frequently.

Safe Rooms Save Lives

Tresia Crymes lives in Vilonia, Arkansas. Eight years ago, she had installed a \$3,800 safe room with help from a \$1,000 grant from the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management. Crymes said she decided to invest her own money in the project because her then-11-year-old daughter feared storms. Throughout the years, the family had sought safe haven in the 6-foot-by-8-foot concrete shelter during tornado warnings, but no storm system had ever really tested the shelter until April 25 of this year when a deadly tornado ripped through their Vilonia neighborhood. That night, four adults, four children and two dogs huddled in fright in that underground safe room after warning sirens went off in their town. “It saved our lives that night,” Crymes has said.

When they emerged from the safe room, Crymes saw widespread destruction. Winds had ripped away much of her home's roof and ceilings and torn apart its outer walls. A neighbor who is the mother of two young children who were also in the safe room, discovered many shattered windows in her home. Falling trees had split the roof, and nearly 50 big trees had been uprooted or snapped.

The EF-2 tornado that day carved a 51-mile path of destruction across Pulaski, Faulkner and White counties, killing four people. The same day 17 more tornadoes as well as straight-line winds ripped through western and central Arkansas, causing three more fatalities. More than 40 tornadoes occurred in Arkansas from April 14 to early May.

Crymes has since moved to a new home in Vilonia. She has arranged for a contractor to dig up her safe room and relocate it to her new home.

"It was a good investment," she said. "I believe it could save my life again, but this time with my new neighbors. They know it is coming and they don't have one."

ADEM's grant program reimburses 50 percent of the cost of a safe room or storm shelter or up to \$1,000, whichever is less, to help pay for the cost of safe shelter.

Vilonia High School Safe Room

It was recently announced that FEMA has awarded more than \$1 million to the state of Arkansas for construction of a tornado safe room at Vilonia High. The community began the grant application about a year ago (before the April tornado). FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program will pay 75 percent, or \$1,000,440, of the more than \$1.3 million project. The school district is the 38th in Arkansas to receive a safe room grant in the last five years.

The stand-alone safe room, to be built on campus, will measure more than 6,500 square feet and should accommodate nearly 1,150 people during a severe storm or tornado.

Work is expected to begin soon on the new structure, which will double as a physical education facility.

Though the recent storm was not the original reason for the safe room, it certainly underscores the need. It would have been a great place for people to go the evening of April 25th. We expect a lot more people will use it now that they've seen the consequences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Arkansas is home to the distinct possibility of almost any kind of disaster. Earthquakes, pandemic, severe weather, tornadoes, floods, ice storms, drought, terrorism, and hazardous materials are many of the threats in our state. As part of our planning process, we strive to create an awareness of these potential disasters and plan to lessen the effects they will have on our state. We are faced with numerous challenges in that planning process, most revolving around funding.

We are continually working to ensure that Arkansas is ready for the threats we face and will be able to better handle the aftermath of disaster, including the all-important recovery process. We define recovery as the rapid restoration of normal routines following a disaster. We carry out this task in the following manner: Informing people of disaster assistance programs; encouraging counseling for victims and their families; and providing local and state agencies. Therefore, it is through understanding and creating an awareness of preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery, that we can better prepare Arkansans for disasters.

We welcome and appreciate the help of our Federal, State and local partners in this mission as well as the many volunteer groups and individuals.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today and I look forward to any questions the Subcommittee members may have.