

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

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“Examining FEMA’s Strategic Priorities and Disaster Preparedness”

Submitted

By

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Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to discuss the 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan and the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Budget request.

The field of emergency management is at a pivotal moment in its history. There are tremendous changes to the risk landscape facing this nation and to our professional roles. While our mission has not changed, our operating environment has. Ten years ago, we managed an average of 108 disasters a year. Today, as of June 16, we are managing 349 — including the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2015 and 2021 alone, FEMA experienced a 165 percent increase in the number of staff who deployed to support disaster operations for more than 30 days, and an unprecedented 346 percent increase in the number of days FEMA personnel were deployed to disaster operations annually. Weather is becoming more extreme, more intense, and more powerful. Disasters are no longer falling within certain months of the year. Instead, disaster season is yearlong .

The changing climate is the biggest crisis facing our nation. It makes natural disasters more frequent and more destructive, and this pattern will continue for the foreseeable future. We have seen this recently with the severe winter storms, derechos, hurricanes, and the increasing frequency and size of wildfires throughout the nation. At the same time, structural inequities in our society are compounding the impacts of disasters for underserved communities. Left unaddressed, these challenges pose unacceptable risks to our citizens. These disaster events – and so many others – require FEMA to respond more frequently and with greater resources than ever before in our history. The FEMA FY 2023 budget request ensures the Agency can continue to meet these challenges and be prepared for the future as it helps people before, during, and after disasters.

FEMA aligned its budget request to support goals outlined in our 2022-2026 Strategic Plan. These goals are: 1) instill equity as a foundation of emergency management; 2) lead the whole of community in climate resilience; and 3) promote and sustain a ready FEMA and a prepared nation. Our budget request reflects our continued intent to execute our mission, while effectively and efficiently managing resources. It allows us to coordinate response, recovery, mitigation, and preparedness missions while maintaining a highly skilled team of employees who are ready and able to respond to ongoing and future disasters of any kind. Concurrently, it allows us to remain focused on our ongoing COVID-19 efforts as we transition to the new normal.

Instill Equity as a Foundation of Emergency Management

As an Agency, we must instill equity as a foundation of emergency management. It is important we recognize disasters affect individuals and communities differently. We must commit ourselves to eliminate barriers to access and pledge to deliver equitable outcomes for all survivors. FEMA meets disaster survivors who just experienced their worst day, and we must ensure our policies and programs meet them where they are and provide support in an accessible and user-friendly way. Systems which create barriers and result in inequitable outcomes serve no one, especially in times of crisis. Our Strategic Plan focuses our entire Agency on putting people first and reducing the barriers to individuals and communities accessing our programs.

We have already made important changes to the way we provide assistance. For instance, some homeowners had difficulty proving they owned their homes if their property had been handed down from generation to generation through the years. We took action by expanding the types of ownership

documentation we can accept, including documents like receipts for major repairs or improvements, court documents, public officials' letters, mobile home park letters, and even applicant self-certification for mobile homes and travel trailers as a last resort. In addition, FEMA has changed the way we calculate the threshold for property losses to qualify for our Direct Housing program (such as a trailer or mobile home). Our goal is to ensure equitable damage evaluations regardless of the amount of damage to the home. Changing the calculation of the threshold from a fixed dollar floor of \$17,000 to a simpler \$12 per square foot, resulted in more than 2,770 families receiving assistance who would not have been considered for direct housing in the past. That means 2,770 families with a roof over their head, beds to sleep in, and a stove to cook with. This change especially made a difference for survivors with lower value homes. These are a few examples of where our people first approach has made a difference. But we can do more. We will do more.

We also know, the more our workforce resembles the nation we serve, the better we will be at serving our nation. Which is why our Strategic Plan focuses our recruiting efforts to reach individuals from underrepresented communities, including through the Emergency Management Institute and partnering with organizations like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium of Tribal Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Our goal is to create hiring pipelines from these institutions into the field of emergency management, opening new opportunities for underrepresented communities who may not see themselves reflected in today's workforce, and as a result, may have been dissuaded from joining the emergency management profession.

Lead Whole of Community in Climate Resilience

FEMA is not just a response and recovery agency. One of my highest priorities is to focus equally on hazard mitigation. What we can do to prevent a disaster is often as important as what we do after disaster strikes. We must recognize our climate crisis and integrate future conditions into our planning efforts now. Historically, Congress' investment in hazard mitigation has been strong. We have seen this through your support of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program in 2018. We've seen it through the appropriation of \$6.8 billion in funds to FEMA in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021, including funding to establish revolving loan funds under the STORM Act. We thank you for your support and for working with the Biden-Harris Administration to pass this legislation.

We must think innovatively as we approach disaster hazard mitigation and shift our projects to those with community-wide impact. We must eliminate the barriers underserved communities face when seeking hazard mitigation assistance. These investments will only grow in importance as climate change continues to alter the landscape of risk facing emergency managers across the country. Which is why we made resources available, such as new Direct Technical Assistance, for local communities to provide support for both project and application-specific needs, as well as community-wide resilience needs.

Our FY 23 budget request includes \$3.4 billion to support strategies to address climate change through community partnerships. This includes further investments in BRIC, our Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, flood maps, and the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard. Specifically, we are setting aside another \$1 billion of the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) exclusively for the BRIC program. This set aside will help communities build capacity by funding hazard mitigation projects such as seismic retrofits, stormwater management plans, construction of flood control and floodways, and many other

projects to reduce risks at the state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) levels. The funding is in addition to the bipartisan IJA's \$1 billion over five years to implement BRIC. Our FY 2023 request also includes more than \$500 million to update FEMA's inventory of maps, including to show future flood risk conditions. Flood risk can change over time due to fluctuating weather patterns, new building and development, and other factors. FEMA will continue to work with its SLTT governmental partners nationwide to identify flood risk and promote informed planning and development practices to reduce risk.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, since 1980, total costs associated with severe storms and flooding estimates are \$345 billion and \$168 billion, respectively. Climate change projections suggest wildfires and storms will likely become more frequent and stronger in many regions in the country. The federal government is taking steps to ensure federal investments include standards of safety against climate hazards, floods, and sea level rise in order to make communities more resilient to flooding. The FY 2023 funding allows us to support the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard and its climate-informed, science-based activities with the purpose of preparing for future flood conditions.

Additionally, FEMA will implement a national strategy for its programs, and provide leadership to an all-of-government initiative to advance the adoption of disaster-resistant building codes that will strengthen buildings, including against climate-induced disaster impacts. This will increase FEMA's ability to provide the information, awareness, guidance, tools, and support required at the SLTT levels to save lives and reduce losses. A 2019 study by the National Institute of Building Sciences found that adopting the latest building codes save eleven dollars for every dollar invested.

Promote and Sustain a Ready FEMA and a Prepared Nation

The increased frequency, severity, and complexity of disasters has heightened demands on FEMA's workforce and on the first responder community in every state, territory, tribal nation, county, and city in the nation which comprise the broader emergency management community. To rise to this challenge, FEMA must expand its approach to Agency readiness and to national preparedness.

FEMA's request includes \$19.7 billion for the DRF to address current and future disasters. To reach this number, FEMA worked shoulder-to-shoulder with disaster-impacted states and localities to understand their recovery needs from ongoing catastrophic disasters, in addition to evaluating the historical cost average for non-catastrophic disasters; the previously mentioned allocation for BRIC; and a reserve to ensure FEMA maintains the ability to fund initial response operations for new significant events.

Like disasters, terrorist attacks can occur at any time and at any place. Tragically, we were reminded of this reality earlier this year during a hostage standoff at the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, demonstrating that threats to the U.S. no longer exist only in major population centers. The risk of terrorism exists everywhere in America. As the threats we face evolve, so too must the grant programs created to prepare for those threats. Nonprofit organizations require assistance to harden their facilities and provide other security enhancements that will mitigate and thwart terrorist attacks. I visited the Congregation Beth Israel and spoke to the Rabbi at the synagogue following the attack. He relayed to me of the importance of this program and how it helped save lives. His experience only reinforced our request to Congress for \$360 million for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. Thank you for your support of this program.

We must also protect our nation's networks and infrastructure from evolving cybersecurity threats. The bipartisan IJA law also provided \$1 billion over four years to improve SLTT cybersecurity and critical infrastructure. The FY 2023 President's Budget includes a request for \$80 million, which will complement the IJA funding by establishing a competitive grant program, which will be administered by FEMA, but leverage the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) subject matter expertise. Under the proposed program, funds are competitively awarded to owners and operators of critical infrastructure based on identified risks and vulnerabilities associated with emerging threats or identified gaps within the systems and networks of the assets within their control. The funding will bolster efforts to prevent cyber-attacks and to ensure critical infrastructure providers can continue to deliver their vital services to Americans uninterrupted.

In recent years we have seen an uptick in nationwide crises which do not fall within the statutory definition of a disaster. When the nation faced such events, FEMA was called on to provide incident management support for the federal response such as Operations Allies Welcome, the Southwest Border Coordination Center, and the Russia/Ukraine Domestic Preparedness and Response Unified Coordination Group. FEMA has unique expertise in the federal government to provide such support, but it must be better prepared to respond to similar missions and events in the future. We request an additional \$1.8 million to maintain the Non-Stafford Act Incident Management Assistance Team, a program funded in the FY 2022 enactment. This will provide an enduring capability to respond to incidents requiring incident management support.

We are also in the process of looking at the architecture of our Stafford Act disaster workforce to better meet the challenges of the yearlong operational tempo which is our new reality. As FEMA's incident management and incident support workforce continues to grow, we are prioritizing the growth of the support workforce which enables them, such as the procurement specialists needed to execute the contracts and mission assignments, which allows us to actually mobilize assistance; the computer specialists who facilitate data and information sharing within FEMA's IT infrastructure; those who ensure civil rights are protected in all activities; and the personnel necessary to train the workforce, manage operations, and focus on employee wellness.

The last group is so critical. Dealing with an unrelenting pace of a year-round cycle of disasters and crisis takes its toll on the FEMA team. To be ready for the next disaster, whenever it comes, we must look out for the physical, emotional and mental health of our people. We are looking at ways to let our people rest and reset, to take care of themselves, and make sure their families are taken care of. We cannot do what we do without our people. Their adaptability, dedication, and willingness to do the hard work is unquestionable and unbelievable.

Emergency management is at a pivotal moment in history. We are witnessing tremendous change in the landscape of risk and in our professional roles. While our core mission has not changed, our operating environment has. The 2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan and FY 2023 budget request are consistent with and support the challenges we face. I look forward to working with you as we continue to build a ready FEMA and more resilient nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.