

**Statement of General Joseph L. Votel (USA, ret.)
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before the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
on “Preparing for Future Crises: Examining the National Response Enterprise”**

March 24, 2021

Good morning Chairwoman Hassan, Ranking Member Paul, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the work of the *Commission on the National Response Enterprise*, which was convened by Business Executives for National Security (BENS) in June of last year.

With your permission, I will begin with an introduction to BENS. Business Executives for National Security is a national, non-partisan organization of senior executives who volunteer their time and talent to address business-related challenges faced by organizations across the national security enterprise. Since its founding in 1982, BENS’ members have responded to requests for assistance from military and government partners by sharing expertise, recommendations, and best practices from their own experience in the private sector, as well as by proactively identifying and offering insights, perspectives, and advice on security objectives.

We will all remember, just over a year ago, being constantly barraged by 24-hour news cycles filled with stories about skyrocketing numbers of COVID diagnoses and deaths around the country; about the devastating toll of the pandemic on the U.S. economy; and about supply chain problems for everything from toilet paper to PPE and respirators to qualified medical personnel. Most Americans were understandably left feeling frightened, helpless, and many hopeless. In these news reports, though, our BENS recognized business challenges similar to the ones they grapple with every day and saw an opportunity to use their experience and expertise to help -- if not immediately, than to strengthen the Nation’s response to future crises.

With that goal in mind, BENS launched the *Commission on the National Response Enterprise* to create what we believed would be a new model for emergency response to strengthen U.S. resiliency through enhanced coordination, communication, and cooperation between all levels of government, business, and civil society. We pulled together 33 Commissioners representing all three of these sectors to work this issue -- former senior military leaders, CEOs of some of the most respected American corporations, a former cabinet secretary, a Nobel laureate, former White House homeland security advisors, members of Congress and state and local leaders.

Joining our Commissioners in this effort were 58 additional business leaders who interviewed 165 government, private sector, and civil society stakeholders and researched five critical

components of emergency response: Roles, Surge, Supplies, People, and Infrastructure & Economy.

I'd like to take this opportunity to especially thank Senators Hassan and Cassidy for their support, deep knowledge and guidance throughout the Commission's 90-day work period and in the months since.

Following all of this research and analysis, the Commission concluded that the Nation does NOT, in fact, need a new model of emergency response -- the components of an integrated national response capability are essentially in place within the US National Response Framework (NRF). However, very significant execution challenges do exist, particularly when a crisis impacts numerous states simultaneously, with limited time to acquire and pre-position needed supplies and other resources.

Throughout the response to COVID-19, gaps and breakdowns in systems and operations disrupted communication, impeded coordination, and negatively impacted surge and supply chains for critical goods and services among stakeholders across all sectors. In short, they prevented the "Whole Community" involvement envisioned in both the NRF and the National Preparedness Goal: "A secure and resilient Nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk."

Unless these weaknesses are addressed, future pandemics, natural disasters, coordinated cyberattacks, or acts of terror will have enormous potential to again imperil our citizens, cripple our infrastructure, threaten our economy, and put our national security at risk. Now is the time for transformational thinking about emergency response strategy, policies, and processes.

The final report of the *Commission on a National Response Enterprise, a Call to Action*, offers 11 recommendations for ways in which we should reimagine and redesign our response capabilities to reflect and embrace 21st Century realities in how the Nation handles crises that affect the country's entire fate. These recommendations are focused in three areas: facilitating communication and coordination, delivering supplies and volunteer resources, and leveraging emerging technology.

The *Call to Action* has been submitted for inclusion in the record so I won't take up time in walking through all 11 recommendations. Instead, I highlight for your awareness several actions embedded within the recommendations which appear particularly relevant to the Subcommittee's mission areas. These include:

- Amending the Stafford Act to include pandemics, cyber events, and other emergencies of extended duration or with possible nationwide impacts.
- Requiring biennial delivery of a National Emergency Response Strategy by the Secretary of Homeland Security.

- Establishment of expense-reporting authority for all emergency-related response spending by the Federal government.
- Re-design of FEMA's National Response Coordination Center to link responder networks and help create a common operating picture for all stakeholders.
- Expanding inclusion of non-traditional partners by DHS and FEMA in response efforts.
- Creating a Surge Center within FEMA that uses emerging technologies and telecommunications capabilities to deliver the situational awareness, secure the two-way information exchange, and share the data analytics needed across all sectors to drive accurate, real-time decision-making.
- Development of a secure national disaster app that offers voluntary access to features such as a map displaying current disaster and response activities, and AI-enabled predictive analytics showing future threat areas and actions needed.
- Enhancing industrial base and stockpile resilience through investment in cutting-edge data visualization tools and technologies like AI, machine learning, and blockchain to enable information sharing in real-time and inform rapid decision-making.
- Developing a strategy, framework, secure capabilities, and the computational resources necessary to guide sharing of timely and accurate data before and during times of national crisis.
- Prioritize the acquisition and use of new technologies capable of engendering trust in the handling of personal data.
- Exploration of targeted protections for organizations and businesses asked to share information and data with governments during times of crisis.
- Driveing and incentivizing IT modernization by the federal agencies and departments that are part of the National Response Framework, as well as efforts to migrate state and local legacy systems to new, secure platforms capable of integration across the NRF.
- The establishment of consistent, pervasive testing and exercising across the emergency response enterprise.

Should the members of the Subcommittee have questions about these points or any of the other material included in the *Call to Action*, I am accompanied today by three experts from the Commission who have deep subject matter knowledge related to FEMA; surge and supply; and data and tech. They are: Former FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate; Ms. Kristi Rogers, Managing Partner of Principal to Principal LLC; and Michael Capps, CEO, Diveplane Corp. and former President of Epic Games.

Senators, we cannot change what has already occurred—but, going forward, we can commit to do better. BENS hopes the Commission's *Call to Action* can serve as a blueprint for policymakers, legislators, and other thought leaders as we strive, together, to elevate the United States' ability to prepare for and respond to future crises. We stand ready to work with the members of the Subcommittee, the full Committee, and any other interested members of the House of Representatives and the Senate in moving the Nation toward this critical goal. Thank you.