



STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

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"Disaster Readiness: Examining the Propriety of the Expanded Use of FEMA Resources."

Submitted

By

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Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you today about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) evolving role within the emergency management community. We value this committee's legislative support and oversight of our agency, and I look forward to our conversation today.

The Committee expressed particular interest in discussing two topics at today's hearing: FEMA's work on the COVID-19 pandemic, and FEMA's facilitation of migrant-related programs. I appreciate the opportunity to dive into these topics today. The field of emergency management has changed in recent years, and emergency managers—at every level of government—are being asked to do more. The problems facing communities are more complex and interrelated. We are chief problem solvers, conveners, coordinators, and strategists. And as our field develops and grows, so too do the expectations of what emergency managers are expected to handle.

COVID-19 is a prime example of these evolving expectations. As Members of this committee will recall, on March 19, 2020, the previous Administration directed FEMA to assume leadership of the federal government's coordinated response to the pandemic. For the first time in U.S. history, there were concurrent Major Disaster Declarations across every state, five territories, three Tribal Nations, and the District of Columbia.

FEMA rose to the occasion. During the early response, FEMA, through coordination with the federal interagency community, helped health care systems across the country stay staffed and equipped so they could deliver lifesaving medical care. FEMA also provided financial assistance to all levels of government to cover critical community services like emergency medical care and the distribution of necessary supplies such as food, medicine, and personal protective equipment.

Fast forward to January 2021 and FEMA's role continued to evolve, now with a focus on achieving President Biden's goal of administering 100 million COVID-19 vaccinations in 100 days. FEMA coordinated with federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners to support the establishment and expansion of over 2,100 Community Vaccination Centers (CVCs). This included 39 federally led CVC pilot sites and the deployment of 18 mobile vaccination units to help reach traditionally underserved and more remote communities. With the help of our partners, FEMA exceeded the goal of 100 million vaccinations in 100 days by putting 213 million shots in arms.

In February 2021, the President directed 100 percent federal cost share for eligible emergency protective expenses incurred by SLTT partners in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through July 1, 2022. This included reimbursement for costs for emergency work, such as vaccination efforts, COVID-19 screening, and personal protective equipment. FEMA also expanded the activities eligible for reimbursement to support the safe opening and operation of schools, child-care facilities, health care facilities, non-congregate shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transit systems impacted by COVID-19. These changes were critical to protecting the health of communities so we could safely transition out of this challenging chapter in our nation's history.

Simply put, the decision to cover 100 percent of costs, including the vaccination campaign, saved countless lives. During most of the pandemic, including during the darkest days in early 2020, I was the Commissioner of the New York City Emergency Management Department. New York City, ordinarily a well-funded, bustling city suffered – like many places in America – from plummeting revenue and increasing demands because of the pandemic. As vaccines became available, my team and I were involved in planning the historic vaccination effort – it was going to be intense, needed to happen quickly and effectively, and was going to be expensive. Staff needed to be hired, contracts needed to be issued, equipment needed to be purchased in order to safely receive, transport, store, and administer the vaccine. These massive expenses would not have been endurable without the federal government’s financial commitment.

The COVID-19 disaster declaration period ended on May 11, 2023, and FEMA is working to complete reimbursement of eligible expenses incurred by SLTT partners and other stakeholders. As of January 24, 2024, FEMA has provided more than \$75 billion through its Public Assistance program. With the recent deadline for applications, we assessed the total number of healthcare specific claims and doubled the number of staff hired to help process our healthcare claims so we can accelerate reimbursements while also safeguarding taxpayer dollars against fraud.

The scale of this historic event required FEMA to adapt to the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic while simultaneously maintaining mission readiness for other natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, or wildfires. For example, in 2021, even as FEMA focused on supporting vaccination distribution efforts, the agency responded to Hurricane Ida, the fifth strongest landfalling hurricane to impact the continental United States. FEMA also responded to severe winter storms across the central United States, which caused prolonged power outages for nearly 10 million people. This is a testament to the unwavering dedication of our FEMA workforce. The lessons we learned as an agency during the pandemic have made us even stronger and better prepared for the next emergency.

I mentioned that FEMA’s work on the COVID-19 pandemic began during the previous Administration, and the same is true of FEMA’s grant work relating to assistance to migrants . As you know, FEMA is not an immigration or law enforcement agency. However, FEMA has a recognized expertise in executing grant programs and providing incident management coordination for both federal partners and SLTT stakeholders.

Through the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Humanitarian Assistance and Security at the Southern Border Act of 2019, Congress directed FEMA to use the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) to provide financial support to organizations providing assistance to migrants encountered by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) at the border. FEMA designated this assistance as Emergency Food and Shelter Program – Humanitarian (EFSP-H). Congress made additional appropriations for this purpose in Fiscal Years 2021, 2022, and 2023. In all, \$715 million was provided for humanitarian assistance through the EFSP-H program.

Through the FY23 Omnibus Appropriations Act, Congress directed the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to transfer \$800 million to FEMA and transition humanitarian assistance from EFSP to a new Shelter and Services Program, in collaboration with the CBP.

FEMA has executed this Congressional direction, and to date has provided almost \$364 million to states, localities, and non-profit organizations for this purpose.

A limited number of FEMA personnel have intermittently supported the coordination of efforts by the Department at the southern border since 2014 (including under the previous Administration in 2019). In 2021, FEMA assisted the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the setup of logistical operations to process the surge in unaccompanied migrant children. In 2022, FEMA also supported the Southwest Border Coordination Center, which provided incident management technical assistance and other support to CBP. Finally, along with staff from other DHS components, FEMA staff have participated in the DHS Volunteer Force at the southern border, in non-law-enforcement humanitarian roles. At its peak in 2022, these efforts involved fewer than 250 FEMA personnel combined. These border missions were important, but they did not undermine FEMA's ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic or multiple natural disasters. The cost of FEMA's assistance was reimbursed to the agency under the Economy Act, which authorizes Federal agencies to provide goods and services, on a reimbursable basis, to each other. As of this month, there are only around 50 FEMA personnel supporting the southwest border mission.

Regardless of the challenges that FEMA confronts, we will always prioritize the wellbeing, recruitment, and retention of a well-trained workforce ready to deploy at a moment's notice. We have both national and regional personnel at the ready to support lifesaving and life-sustaining response operations, including five National and 13 Regional Incident Management Assistance Teams; 28 Urban Search and Rescue Teams; and 36 Emergency Communications Teams. But the vast majority of our 23,600-person workforce consists of reservists. And I would like to again thank this Committee and Congress for taking a huge step in helping us recruit and retain reservists by passing the Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce (CREW) Act, which extends to our reservists the job protections of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

FEMA is well prepared to execute its powerful mission statement: helping people before, during, and after disasters. And we continue to adapt to the changing face of disaster management to meet the needs of the moment. I would like to quickly touch on two initiatives that are helping us evolve.

The first is our recent announcement of revised regulations for our Individual Assistance Program, which will streamline assistance, cut red tape, and make it easier for survivors to access the assistance for which they qualify. These changes draw on lessons learned over the past 20 years and hundreds of public comments that we received in preparing these regulations.

The second is what we are calling the Year of Resilience. This is a first-of-its-kind campaign that will help our agency build resilience at all levels—federal to individual. While traditionally thought of as a response and recovery agency, we want people to think of FEMA as a resilience agency and to understand that we have the tools communities need to be more resilient, prepared, and ready before a disaster strikes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.