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ON BEHALF OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

**HEARING TITLED, "REFORMING FEMA: BRINGING BACK COMMON SENSE TO FEDERAL
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT"
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE - SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important role counties play in disaster response, recovery and mitigation.

My name is Adrian Garcia, and I serve as a Commissioner in Harris County, Texas. I also serve as the Chair of the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee and Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force at NACo.

NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States, including Alaska's boroughs and Louisiana's parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities. NACo works to strengthen county resiliency by advocating for federal policies and programs that help county leaders identify and manage risk and allow counties to become more flexible and responsive to disasters. Through sustainable practices and infrastructure, counties become better prepared to address these issues in a manner that can minimize the impact on our residents and businesses.

Harris County is home to over 4.8 million residents to whom we provide critical services, including public safety and emergency services, public housing, health and human services, transportation and more. We predominantly rely on local property taxes to ensure our many responsibilities are met; however, due to constraints on local revenues that are enforced at the state level, a strong intergovernmental partnership is critical as we work to meet the challenges of today and plan for the future.

For example, in 2017 Harris County was struck by Hurricane Harvey. This catastrophic event resulted in widespread flooding, affecting approximately 300,000 structures and displacing thousands of residents. The storm resulted in at least 89 fatalities in Harris County, with many occurring outside designated flood zones, underscoring the unpredictable nature of such disasters. The storm's unprecedented rainfall overwhelmed our infrastructure, leading to significant economic and social repercussions

More recently, Hurricane Beryl made landfall in July 2024, causing extensive power outages that affected over 2.7 million households and businesses. The prolonged loss of electricity, combined with extreme heat, led to at least six heat-related fatalities in Harris County.

Paramount among other critical county responsibilities is the role of counties in community preparedness. Counties are on the front lines of defense before, during and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Following a disaster, local elected officials and emergency managers are often the first on the scene and play a key role in the coordination of local emergency management efforts. Other key county staff involved in pre- and post-disaster efforts include local police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, because counties are major owners of public infrastructure, we are also uniquely

positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters before they occur. Collectively, we own 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, over 650 nursing homes and directly support a third of the nation's airports and public transit systems. We also own and maintain a wide variety of public safety infrastructure, including roadside ditches, flood control channels, stormwater culverts and pipes and other infrastructure used to funnel water away from low-lying roads, properties and businesses. Counties provide extensive outreach and education to residents on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters, and we work to reduce water pollution, adopt setbacks for land use plans and are responsible for water recharge areas, green infrastructure and water conservation programs.

Over the past 20 years, natural and man-made disasters have increased in frequency, severity and cost. On average, 25 percent of counties have experienced at least one disaster in each of the last three years. In 2023, 849 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster, 720 counties had at least one disaster declaration and 312 counties had at least one emergency declaration and. That same year, the nation experienced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, which totaled approximately \$93 billion in damages.

As a result of this uptick in frequency and cost, NACo has launched the [Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force](#) to strengthen our nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery capabilities. The Task Force brings together county officials from across the country to advocate for practical, common-sense reforms that improve disaster response, recovery and mitigation. Given that counties are on the frontlines of disaster management, our direct involvement in federal policy reforms is essential to ensure that policies are practical, effective, and address the unique challenges faced by local communities. By having a seat at the table, counties can advocate for streamlined processes and resources tailored to their specific needs, leading to more resilient and prepared communities nationwide.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation. Rather, we are a part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from both natural and man-made disasters. Like the federal government, counties are entrusted by taxpayers to provide a variety of important services to our residents, and we stand ready to work with our intergovernmental counterparts to improve community resiliency and mitigate the impacts of future disasters. To this end, counties offer the following considerations:

- 1. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is vital for disaster response and recovery, but operational challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies demand urgent reforms to ensure more effective and equitable program delivery.**
- 2. Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources, particularly for underserved and disadvantaged communities, by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.**
- 3. County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.**

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is vital for disaster response and recovery, but operational challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies demand urgent reforms to ensure more effective and equitable program delivery.

Disaster response, recovery and mitigation starts local and ends local. Counties across the country are currently managing large scale recovery efforts, while simultaneously continuing to meet our daily responsibilities around ensuring our communities remain safe and resilient to the next disaster. While we are doing our part at the local level, effective response and recovery efforts would not be possible without the continued support from agencies like FEMA, who administer programs that provide vital resources before, during and after disasters. Without FEMA, state and local governments would face significant challenges in recovering from disaster due to limited resources and coordination capabilities.

However, FEMA's effectiveness is often hindered by inflexible decision-making processes and excessive bureaucratic red tape, highlighting the need for reform. The agency's layered approval procedures and complex administrative requirements can delay the delivery of critical resources to communities in need. We have heard countless examples from counties about the challenges of navigating FEMA's stringent application processes and slow response times. Streamlining decision-making, increasing transparency, and reducing unnecessary administrative barriers would allow FEMA to respond more swiftly and effectively, ensuring communities receive timely support in the aftermath of a disaster.

One such program that is in desperate need of reform is FEMA's Public Assistance (PA) Program. PA is crucial for helping communities rebuild after disasters, but the lengthy process to receive reimbursement can delay recovery efforts and hinder our ability to restore critical services post disaster. Last year, NACo conducted a survey of members that concluded that one in five counties (20 percent) longest open PA claim had been in processing between four and six years; almost a third of respondents (28 percent) reported processing times exceeding six years. For counties with all outstanding claims paid, the majority (71 percent) report typical turnaround times between one and three years. Because PA operates as a reimbursement, the cost of response efforts is paid upfront using county funds placing significant financial strain on counties, who are often forced to take out large loans to cover upfront disaster costs.

NACo has strongly supported the *FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act* – passed by this committee in the 118th Congress – and a [proposal from the FEMA National Advisory Council](#) to treat the first few months of PA as a grant versus a reimbursement, which would dramatically improve disaster recovery for localities. By offering immediate relief through grants for the initial months, communities would have access to essential funds more quickly, allowing them to respond to urgent recovery needs without the burden of upfront costs. Additionally, the *FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act* would reduce the financial pressure on communities, allowing for any interest incurred on disaster loans to be reimbursed by PA. These measures would help ensure that recovery efforts are not delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles or financial barriers, ultimately allowing communities to rebuild faster and more effectively.

Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources, particularly for underserved and disadvantaged communities, by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.

Unfortunately, bureaucratic red tape follows a disaster. For example, requiring the completion of complex and overly burdensome paperwork by communities who may be entirely unfamiliar with system protocols and who are attempting to undertake these processes during the most stressful times of their lives can significantly impede progress when it is needed most. Populations that feel the biggest impact are often our underserved and disadvantaged communities where resources and capacity to complete applications and meet critical deadlines can be severely exacerbated.

Ensuring no communities are left behind requires reexamining current procedures when applying for federal funding. Implementing plain language into applications, providing clear timelines and identifying resources available to assist applicants during the process are paramount to improving the resiliency of our communities. Excessive paperwork and lack of clarity can be particularly difficult for jurisdictions who may be under resourced or dealing with co-occurring disasters, as we saw with many parts of the country throughout the last few years.

Counties have long supported legislation like the *Disaster Survivors Fairness Act* ([H.R.1245](#)) – approved by this committee in the 118th Congress – and the *Disaster Assistance Simplification Act* ([S.861](#)). These critical pieces of legislation would streamline the application process for federal aid, reducing redundant paperwork and making it easier for survivors to access the support they need. By improving coordination between agencies and simplifying eligibility requirements, these reforms would alleviate the administrative burden on those recovering from disasters.

County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.

Counties across the country are working daily to address the needs of our residents and make decisions that drive the success of our jurisdictions. While we are doing our part at the local level, [45 states limit the ability of counties to raise revenue](#) in various ways, making the intergovernmental partnership vital to meeting our public sector responsibilities. Only 29 states authorize counties to collect sales taxes, but almost always under various restrictions. 26 states impose a sales tax limit and 19 require voter approval. For western counties, who are at great risk of flooding and wildfires, state restrictions on local revenues can be even more impactful, as much of the land within western county boundaries is considered federal land, thus removing the ability of a county to levy property taxes.

While disasters are inherently local, counties rely on our state and federal partners for critical disaster recovery tools, like funding assistance, human capital and technical assistance. Without proper federal and state support, county recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full capabilities necessary to rebuild our communities and make them more resilient against future disasters. In an environment where counties have limited financial flexibility, a strong intergovernmental partnership is crucial to community recovery and key to the success of future mitigation efforts.

With that in mind, Congress should prioritize legislation that seeks to strengthen intergovernmental

partnerships in disaster recovery by enhancing coordination, streamlining communication and supporting resource-sharing between all levels of government. By promoting pre-disaster planning, simplifying aid processes and supporting local recovery efforts, lawmakers can ensure a more effective and coordinated response to disasters.

Conclusion

Counties are on the front lines of the pre- and post-disaster efforts, and without proper federal assistance, recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full support necessary to rebuild our communities and return the lives of our residents to normal.

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for inviting me to testify here today.

Counties stand ready to work side-by-side with our federal and state partners to make our communities more resilient and ensure the health, well-being and safety of our citizens.