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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**On behalf of the
National Emergency Management Association**

**Submitted to the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management**

“An Assessment of Federal Recovery Efforts from Recent Disasters”

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Thank you, Chairman Titus, Ranking Member Meadows, and distinguished members of the Committee for allowing me to testify before you today.

I am proud to testify today as a Past President of the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) and Director of North Carolina Emergency Management (NCEM). NEMA represents the state emergency management directors of all 50 states, territories, and the District of Columbia. On behalf of my colleagues in state emergency management, we thank you for holding this discussion on federal recovery efforts from recent disasters.

ONGOING RECOVERY IN NORTH CAROLINA

Since the devastation of Hurricane Matthew in 2016, North Carolina has experienced multiple hurricanes, tropical storms, and other disasters. Damage from Hurricane Florence alone totaled more than the cost we experienced during Hurricane Matthew and Hurricane Floyd combined, and we were the only state where Hurricane Dorian made landfall earlier this year. While North Carolina is famed for its hurricanes, in the past few years we have also received major disaster declarations for tornados and severe storms, as well as two fire management assistance declarations. As a state which experiences a broad spectrum of natural hazards occurring across North America, we are attuned to the needs of our residents in disaster recovery and focused on a more resilient path forward.

Citizens across the country as well as political leadership must understand the roles and responsibilities in responding to and recovering from disasters. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is not a first responder, and the Governor maintains ultimate authority over managing the disaster, but without robust local emergency management, the execution of programs and projects will falter.

To lead the state's efforts to rebuild smarter and stronger the wake of Hurricane Florence, Governor Cooper established the North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency, or NCORR. The office provides disaster recovery coordination with services that include oversight of recovery funding, processing of program applications, construction and vendor management, and public outreach and education, among many other responsibilities. With NCORR up and running, North Carolina is now on the road to recovery with a team of state, federal and volunteer partners dedicated to helping communities rebuild to be more resilient and better prepared to weather future storms.

NCORR oversees the Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program for the state, managing the disbursement of funds that will total in the hundreds of millions when the next tranche is disbursed. In keeping with the CDBG-DR mandate to prioritize the program's recovery spending in low-income areas, our CDBG-DR Housing Recovery Programs tackle the statewide shortage of affordable housing in coordination with partners at the state and local levels. We seek to instill resiliency in our recovery projects, which enhances coordination across all of our emergency management efforts, including our recovery support functions and the statewide disaster recovery task force.

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS

In September 2016, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published GAO-16-797 and found that “During fiscal years 2005 through 2014, the federal government obligated at least \$277.6 billion across 17 federal departments and agencies for disaster assistance programs and activities.” GAO since revised that number to more than \$400 billion including the years since. Across these 17 agencies, state and local governments and disaster survivors must navigate more than 90 federal programs. While the size and scope of all these programs exceed the capabilities of this hearing, I would like to explore a couple of key programs:

Disaster Case Management Program. The Disaster Case Management Program (DCMP) is a 24-month FEMA grant, which assists survivors with developing and facilitating personal recovery plans. In its most effective form, this process begins immediately after the event so that the survivor’s recovery needs can be addressed before they compound to create other needs such as employment, health care, or childcare transportation.

For Matthew, NCEM began the DCMP grant application process at the time the storm hit and after two months received a 6-month grant for effectively 4-months of operational grant funding. We continue working with FEMA to facilitate the remaining portion of the 24-month grant but continue to operate under short, temporary extensions. The delay in the award makes it harder for us to address survivors’ needs and creates difficulties in case management planning, training, and personnel retention. The uncertainty also affects our coordination with local long-term recovery groups and their ability to provide resources to survivors.

Crisis Counseling Program. The design of the Crisis Counseling Program (CCP) allows states to provide immediate crisis counseling and address behavioral health challenges for 60 days after the disaster event and thereafter up to nine months through the anniversary of the event. The grant is comprised of a two-month Immediate Services Program (ISP) and a nine-month Regular Services Program (RSP). FEMA approved the State’s funding request for the RSP but due to delays within FEMA Region IV, which holds the decision-making authority for these FEMA grants to southern states including North Carolina, the state has not received a Notice of Grant Award (NOGA) from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The lack of a NOGA required seven 30-day extensions to the ISP, two with additional funding for continuation of services to survivors.

The delay in the long-term award negatively affects survivors and makes programmatic planning as well as training and retention of crisis counselors more difficult. FEMA must work with states in implementing the CCP with more speed, transparency, and efficiency to better address the needs of survivors.

Disaster Housing Programs. One of the most sensitive issues post-disaster is managing housing programs. In 2017 we saw states such as Texas take bold steps in managing their own housing programs. Through this process, we learned of some opportunities for better performance overall in the hierarchy of national housing programs and sheltering. Even if the programs are found to be satisfactory, we must consider how best to communicate and manage the relocation of thousands of citizens, and carefully

explain the intent of assistance programs which aim for ultimate repatriation. In recent years, FEMA made intimations of deferring management of the housing mission to states through a block grant, citing regulatory and compliance difficulties. If fundamental problems exist within the housing programs, we should err on the side of make appropriate adjustments, not arbitrarily shifting responsibility to the states which every Governor may not want.

One program receiving attention as of late, mainly due to FEMA announcing the termination of the program, is the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) Program. The STEP program enabled residents to return to or remain in their homes, as a form of shelter while permanent repairs are completed, thereby reducing the number of individuals in congregate shelters or in the Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA).

Now that the program will no longer be authorized, I would be remiss if I did not stress the importance of leveraging other existing programs for emergency sheltering and housing assistance to meet the needs of disaster survivors. FEMA should prioritize programs that enable residents to return to or remain in their homes, as a form of shelter, while permanent repairs are completed. The program should also utilize the partnership between federal, state, and locals to help identify appropriate applicants for the programs. There should be more consideration of the practical expectations in meeting emergency housing needs to the States and the survivors that details how to sign up for the program; timelines of completion; and guidance on what is acceptable. Enabling residents to go back to their homes provides the quick recovery they crave to get back to life as usual.

Disaster Recovery Block Grants. No discussion of long-term recovery would be complete without addressing the CDBG-DR program at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). We always appreciate the support of Congress in appropriating funds to CDBG-DR, and HUD has been a great partner to North Carolina in administering the program. However, the program remains bifurcated from other federal recovery programs and the lack of a regular authorization leaves states waiting months, if not years for HUD to publish Federal Register notices for funding.

One reform which would immediately improve the CDBG-DR process is creating a method by which information from disaster survivors could be shared across various federal agencies. Typically known as a “universal application,” this improvement would allow survivors to complete one application for use by FEMA, HUD, and the Small Business Administration. As recently stated in a letter to Congressional leadership over the signature of seven bipartisan governors, including my own, combining the universal application “with this seamless interagency data sharing would enable significantly better communication and coordination, as well as faster disbursement of funds and improved oversight and accountability.”

In the aftermath of a disaster, the last thing that a disaster survivor needs is to spend significant time navigating federal bureaucracy. Reforming this process signals our commitment at all levels of government to the needs of disaster survivors nationwide in their most critical moments.

COLLABORATION AT THE FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL LEVELS

The cacophony of federal grants programs is confusing to even the most experienced emergency manager. When created in 1978, the charge to FEMA was to coordinate the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters. Over time, the number of FEMA-specific programs grew and the agency is challenged to help states and locals cross-cut the labyrinth of the federal bureaucracy.

For example, states and communities have access to a variety of programs across the federal government, many of which maintain the overarching goal of helping grantees become more resilient and better prepared for future disasters. The specific authorities and purposes of such programs usually vary, however, and FEMA may not have authority to allow grantees to co-mingle funds or shift the priorities of specific grant dollars.

In the case of CDBG-DR, FEMA's Predisaster Mitigation Program, and their new Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, FEMA and HUD could and should do the following:

- Work across the federal interagency and with Congress to obtain the necessary authorities to allow grantees to blend projects with support from other mitigation programs available within FEMA and across the federal government.
- Allow for collaboration, convergence, and promotion of projects that enhance the level of protection of people and property across various programs regardless of the funding sources and legal requirements.
- Anticipate future conditions by broadening allowable project types which meet hazard impacts.

ENSURING THE PUBLIC SHARES THE RISK

Governments cannot be solely responsible for managing the response to and recovery from a disaster. Many programs already exist which allows the public to share in this endeavor, but the political and practical will to make necessary changes and drive for success must come from all of us. In order to gauge our success, we must continually review and reform programs such as the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).

Just as we reviewed policies and programs after Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and the 2017 disaster season, so too must we review the programs and policies that we use today. The measure of success related to disaster response and recovery lies in the overarching programs which help guide our policies.

Much attention has been paid to the NFIP over the last several years, and rightly so. Reforms have been implemented that are designed to stabilize the program, but the desired outcome remains elusive. In the meantime, however, we as a nation are still grossly under-insured against the threat posed by flooding, our most prevalent hazard. Time after time we watch as our communities flood, only to hear from residents that they did not have the appropriate coverage. In the absence of insurance, they rely upon a patchwork of their own fiscal ability, the generosity of the charitable organizations, and federal and state aid that is not designed to make them whole. Such situations delay the recovery of a community and

threaten its very existence. We as a nation must redouble our efforts to design a system that helps people evaluate their individual risk and plan accordingly while simultaneously reducing our collective risk.

The lack of appropriate coverage is not limited to flood; too few Americans truly understand their vulnerability to earthquakes and landslides. The Cascadia Subduction Zone (CSZ) “megathrust” fault is a long dipping fault that stretches from Northern Vancouver Island to Cape Mendocino, California. This area creates the largest earthquakes in the world and previously produced magnitude 9.0 or greater earthquakes. This will undoubtedly occur again in the future. New research using land deposits found at the bottom of the ocean points to a one in three chance of a major earthquake in the Pacific Northwest in the next 50 years. Recovering from a large-scale earthquake in this area would be complicated tremendously by the lack of appropriate insurance coverage and would result in tremendous costs to government at all levels.

CONCLUSION

On behalf of the state emergency managers, thank you again for holding this hearing and drawing attention to the needs of the emergency management community. In North Carolina, we are acutely aware of the need to build upon the momentum of last year’s Disaster Recovery Reform Act to further improve disaster recovery efforts and ensure we support our communities in their time of need. As you consider the topics of this hearing, please remember specifically that federal programs such as CDBG-DR are always capable of improvement, but make real differences in the lives of those impacted by disasters when properly coordinated with other disaster programs at the federal, state, and local levels.