

STATEMENT

OF

PETER T. GAYNOR  
ACTING ADMINISTRATOR  
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE  
THE

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“Update on Recovery Efforts for 2017 and 2018 Disasters”

Submitted

By

Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street SW  
Washington, D.C. 20472

March 12, 2019

## **Introduction**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and Members of the Committee. My name is Peter Gaynor and I am the Acting Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On behalf of U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Nielsen, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the evaluation of federal disaster response and recovery efforts, to include lessons learned from the 2017 and 2018 historic hurricane seasons, and the devastating California wildfires, as well as the ongoing progress made under FEMA's strategic plan.

I am proud to continue to be part of an agency that, every day, helps communities before, during and after disasters. The historic disaster seasons over the last two years were a true test of the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters.

More than two years later, FEMA remains steadfast in its commitment to support the needs of disaster survivors. We continue to work tirelessly to support state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners to respond to and recover from disasters and to mitigate against future disasters. We overcame many challenges, and we have gained invaluable knowledge which we have incorporated into our strategy going forward, but we are not finished. We will continue to adapt and expand our understanding of emergency management to ensure that we can best support our partners' ability to build more resilient communities, lessen the impacts of disasters, and ultimately help individuals get back on their feet quickly.

On February 9, 2018, the President signed into law the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018. Thanks to the authority that Congress has given to FEMA in this law, FEMA may, in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, provide Public Assistance funding for critical services to replace or restore the function of a facility or system to industry standards without restrictions based on their pre-disaster condition. The law further allows FEMA to provide assistance for critical services to replace or restore components of the facility or system that are not damaged by the disaster when it is necessary to fully effectuate the replacement or restoration of disaster-damaged components to restore the function of the facility or system to industry standards.

In Puerto Rico, we are facing many unique challenges throughout the long-term recovery process. We continue to work with our partners in the Commonwealth, other federal agencies, and Congress to find joint, outcome-driven solutions to: (1) develop cohesive, solutions-oriented strategies to maximize federal funding while building a more resilient Puerto Rico; (2) build Puerto Rico's capacity to manage the incoming tens of billions of dollars in grant funding; and (3) continue internal controls to ensure appropriate use of taxpayer funding.

## **Key Themes & Lessons Learned**

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria caused a combined \$265 billion in damage and were each among the top five costliest hurricanes on record. In response, FEMA coordinated large deployments of federal personnel, both before and after the hurricanes' landfalls, to support response and initial recovery efforts across 270,000 square miles. These deployments included more than 17,000 FEMA and federal Surge Capacity Force personnel, and nearly 17,000 personnel from various offices of the Department of Defense. FEMA facilitated logistics missions that moved more than \$2 billion worth of commodities and supplies across several

states and territories, using multiple modes of transportation. FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces, comprised of state and local emergency responders, saved or assisted nearly 9,500 lives across the three hurricanes. In total, the hurricanes and California wildfires affected more than 47 million people—nearly 15 percent of the nation’s population. FEMA registered nearly 4.8 million households for assistance.

The unprecedented scale, scope, and impacts of the complex combination of disasters tested the improved capabilities that were developed as a result of lessons learned from Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy.

Following the 2017 and 2018 disasters, FEMA thoroughly reviewed preparations for the immediate response and initial recovery operations with the goal of identifying lessons learned which collectively benefit future operations undertaken by FEMA, the emergency management community, and the nation. Key themes which emerged include:

- **Sustained Whole Community Logistics Operations:** The scale and duration of life-saving and sustainment operations showed that FEMA must be ready to support logistics missions that span weeks or months, particularly in remote locations where commodities and equipment are transported by non-traditional methods. Plans and procedures for resource movement, sequencing and transportation logistics, including the last mile of delivery when requested, must be effectively coordinated and prioritized with the supported state, territory, or tribe, other government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector supply chain.
- **Federally Supported, State Managed, Locally Executed:** FEMA’s ability to provide support in disasters builds on, and is subject to, the capacity of SLTT governments. If these governments are well resourced, well trained, and well organized, the effectiveness of FEMA’s assistance is enhanced. If the SLTT government’s ability to respond—for example, the ability to provide law enforcement, medical support, or commodity distribution—is diminished, then FEMA and its partners must find ways to deliver and support these critical services. FEMA is not traditionally a first response organization but had to play a more direct response role following Hurricane Maria.
- **Staffing for Concurrent, Complex Incidents:** When Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas, FEMA had staff deployed to 32 presidentially declared disasters across 19 field offices. By the time Maria made landfall following Harvey and Irma, decisions regarding personnel made in support of one incident impacted ongoing disaster operations. FEMA and our federal government partners rapidly surged and deployed personnel to support immediate response operations. FEMA also relied on mission assignments and the Surge Capacity Force to supplement our existing disaster workforce, pulling resources and personnel from across federal government departments and agencies.
- **Survivable and Redundant Communications:** Following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico’s communications infrastructure was so devastated that assessing the needs and the capability of the Commonwealth and its municipalities proved extremely difficult. FEMA provided satellite phones to each of the 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico to gather

information on municipality impacts and critical needs. However, this short-term solution had limited success in addressing overall communications challenges. The private sector played a key role in restoring communications, including cell towers and allowing open roaming services, and remains a critical partner for restoration of communications.

- **Responding during Long-Term Infrastructure Outages:** Too often, we assume the loss of power, communications, and water infrastructure following disasters will be limited in duration. The extreme degradation of critical infrastructure in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands created significant challenges. We need to be prepared for long-term outages of these critical systems, while our SLTT and private sector partners work to mitigate future damages to these vital systems.
- **Disaster Sheltering and Housing:** Providing housing for survivors following the 2017 and 2018 disasters was a challenge, especially when a disaster devastates a community that already had limited affordable housing. Regardless of the readiness of a SLTT government, when dealing with the displacement of tens of thousands of survivors from their homes, there is no easy or one-size-fits-all solution. FEMA has authorities to provide sheltering options including Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) that provides assistance to SLTT governments for survivors to stay in hotel rooms, as well as a program that provides for basic and temporary home repairs to make a home safe to live in while the survivor makes arrangements for more permanent repairs.

Any sheltering option is, by design, a temporary and short-term solution, designed to be a bridge to middle- and longer-term solutions. We have other programs and authorities that assist with housing, including rental assistance, repair assistance, multi-family lease and repair, and manufactured housing units. With all of these options, we partner with our SLTT stakeholders to identify the sheltering and housing solutions that make the most sense for each state, each event, each community, and each survivor.

States have a much better familiarity with the needs of their residents, the local laws and ordinances that can impact some of the FEMA housing options, and are better situated to design and administer to the survivors in their communities. Regardless of the tools we are able to provide, however, permanent housing solutions and full recovery needs are best addressed by insurance. FEMA assistance programs are not designed to return a survivor's home to its pre-disaster condition. As we know, though, there are too many people in our nation that are underinsured or not insured at all.

### **FEMA's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan**

Incorporating the knowledge gained from the 2017 disaster season, FEMA's strategic plan builds on existing best practices and identifies new initiatives geared toward achieving three overarching goals. The three main goals of FEMA's Strategic Plan are to: 1) Build a Culture of Preparedness; 2) Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters; and 3) Reduce the Complexity of FEMA.

### Build a Culture of Preparedness

FEMA is just one part of the team. During a disaster, citizens in the impacted communities also become the first responders. Do they know how to shut off water and gas? Do they check on their neighbors? Do they know CPR? Are they financially prepared to deal with the impacts of disasters in their communities, including having the right insurance for the specific threats they face, including flooding, earthquakes, and tornadoes? Do they have some modest level of savings to allow them to miss a few days of work without ending up in financial ruin? We need to empower individuals to help speed the response and recovery efforts.

Developing resilient communities before an incident occurs reduces loss of life and economic disruption. When communities are impacted, they should ensure that they rebuild infrastructure better, tougher, and stronger to protect taxpayer investment and promote economic stability. FEMA is exploring ways to encourage additional investments in mitigation that reduce risk, including pre-disaster mitigation, to help reduce disaster costs at all levels.

While we will never be able to eliminate all risk, we must mitigate the known risks as much as possible. FEMA will work with communities and insurers to close the insurance gap across the nation. Managing risk through insurance, including the National Flood Insurance Program, helps communities to recover faster following disasters and reduces overall costs for taxpayers.

### Ready the Nation for Catastrophic Disasters

As this past year has shown, communities must increase their capacity to respond to smaller-scale disasters on a local level. We continue to work with our SLTT partners to increase their capacities to respond to and recover from smaller-scale disasters so FEMA and its federal partners can focus more on readiness and support for catastrophic events.

No level of government can continue to plan, train and exercise for what is easy. We need to prepare for catastrophic events that stress our capabilities. In 2017, FEMA announced our intent to embed FEMA staff within SLTT partner offices to help provide a continuous and more coordinated FEMA presence to improve customer service and provide targeted technical assistance to help build capacity and address capability gaps. The first FEMA Integration Team (FIT) was placed in North Carolina in 2018. Prior to Hurricane Florence, the North Carolina FIT developed an understanding of the state's capabilities, gaps, and processes, and helped to develop and share potential needs. Because of the team's proximity and co-location, the FIT began incident preparations for Hurricane Florence much sooner and with a better understanding of issues, prior to landfall. Currently, FEMA has FITs embedded in 16 states with more to follow.

As part of FEMA's initiative to ready the nation for catastrophic events, FEMA is emphasizing the stabilization of critical lifelines and coordination across critical infrastructure sectors. Lifelines provide indispensable services that enable the continuous operation of critical business and government functions, and that would risk health and safety or national economic security if not promptly restored. Solutions to stabilize lifelines do not fit within a single construct (i.e. an Emergency Support Function [ESF] or Recovery Support Function [RSF]), so we must provide cross-sector coordination to effectively stabilize critical lifelines. For example, the critical lifeline of food, water, and sheltering crosses many agencies, community partners, and ESFs, but must be addressed holistically in order to support a community's

recovery. Focusing on these lifelines and related impacts will allow decision-makers to move rapidly and will allow better utilization of limited resources to target towards the restoration of critical functions.

### Reduce the Complexity of FEMA

FEMA is committed to simplifying our processes and putting survivors first. We are looking at ways we can streamline our assistance programs to make FEMA's programs as clear and easy as possible for survivors and grantees to navigate.

Reducing administrative and bureaucratic burdens will allow survivors and communities to receive federal assistance quicker. Throughout the federal government, there are a number of programs that offer assistance to survivors. We are working with our partners to improve some of these activities to ensure survivors can better navigate these various programs. For example, FEMA is consolidating and updating all FEMA Individual Assistance (IA) policies and program guidance to simplify and streamline information about IA programs.

FEMA employees must have transparency and clarity in the processes and resources they deal with. We cannot implement any of these priorities and initiatives without ensuring that they meet the needs of our survivors. We also need to make sure that we continue to capture lessons learned by FEMA and our partners to meet the needs of survivors with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

These are the priorities and vision of this Agency. As we examine and further develop these initiatives, we will find that some can be accomplished by existing authorities Congress has already provided to us. There will be some challenges that cannot be solved by administrative action alone. As we identify these challenges, we will work with this committee and the rest of Congress to ensure we move forward in close partnership. I look forward to working with you on our shared goal to help people before, during, and after disasters.

### **Preparing for the 2019 Hurricane Season & Ongoing Initiatives**

The 2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report (AAR) outlined 18 key findings across five focus areas, and it made recommendations for improvement moving forward. In 2018, Congress took significant steps to help FEMA pursue many of the changes recommended by the AAR when it passed transformational legislation in the Disaster Recovery Reform Act. The law represents the most comprehensive emergency management reform since the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, and will meaningfully assist the nation in reducing risks and increasing preparedness.

The 2017 AAR also discussed the need to improve FEMA's ability to respond to catastrophic events while simultaneously building partner response capacity. Eighty percent of all declared disasters are small (meaning total obligations of \$41 million or less); and disasters below \$41 million have cost FEMA, on average, \$100 million total per year in administrative costs over the past 15 years. FEMA's focus needs to be building the capabilities of our partners to manage smaller disasters so that the Agency can improve our capabilities to respond to the larger and potentially catastrophic disasters our nation faces.

As we continue with recovery operations, FEMA is also focused on making sure we are as prepared as possible for this year's hurricane season. Combining the lessons learned from 2017, as well as the goals outlined in FEMA's Strategic Plan, the Agency took immediate actions to prepare for the 2018 hurricane season. These steps will continue to prepare the Agency for the 2019 hurricane season. These steps included:

- **Updating Plans** - FEMA has updated hurricane plans, annexes, and procedures for many states and territories.
- **Maturing the National Response Framework (NRF) & the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF)** – FEMA updated the NRF and NDRF to incorporate community lifelines construct, enhanced coordination with the private sector, and other best practices and lessons learned.
- **Staff Movement Prior to & During Responses** - To improve staffing for incidents, FEMA created Standard Operating Procedures for a Personnel Mobilization Center (PMC), a central location for equipping and training staff prior to disaster deployments. To support the PMC, FEMA is also establishing three permanent PMC core teams in its Field Operations Directorate and training regional personnel on PMC operations.
- **Logistical Improvements** - FEMA made improvements in logistics operations in preparation for the 2018 hurricane season, including increasing disaster stocks and supplies for the Pacific and Caribbean such as meals, water, tarps, sheeting, cots, blankets, infant and toddler kits, durable medical kits, consumable medical kits, and generators. FEMA is also adding 300 new emergency generators to the inventory.
- **National Level Contracts** - FEMA updated high priority national level contracts, including the National Evacuation Contract, Caribbean Transportation Contract, and National Ambulance Contract.
- **Disaster Communications** - FEMA Disaster Emergency Communications is refining tactical and long haul communications, from land mobile radios to satellite communications. We're working to update emergency communications support plans for each state, incorporating best-practices and lessons learned across both the government and private sector based on each state's unique geographic, infrastructure, and operational requirements or risks to provide the nation with an accessible, modern, reliable, and resilient communications infrastructure.

FEMA installed new FEMA National Radio System (FNARS) high power stations on Guam, Saipan, and American Samoa, and refreshed the FNARS high frequency antenna farm at the FEMA Alternate Operations Center to increase resiliency and survivability. FEMA added more than 200 agencies to the list of state, local, territorial, and tribal authorities with access and ability to use the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) to send emergency alerts and warnings to the public. We also provided technical alert and warning assistance and support to multiple state and local agencies

including for wildfires in California and for hurricanes and volcano in Hawaii, and live public alert tests for the Navaho Nation.

FEMA assisted Puerto Rico Emergency Management Bureau to restore the territory's capability to send alerts and warnings by installing and training staff to use an IPAWS compatible alert origination system, conducting two live tests of the system distributing test messages to the public through radio, television, and cellular phone, and installing a new IPAWS compatible siren system at the Guajataca Dam to warn people below the dam of flood emergencies.

- ***Housing Inspection Process*** - FEMA will modernize housing inspections to improve the survivor experience and streamline the process to lessen the inspection burden for the disaster survivor and better leverage similar efforts across the federal government.
- ***Exercises and Training*** - In May 2018, FEMA sponsored National Level Exercise (NLE) 2018, based on a scenario of a Category 4 hurricane on the mid-Atlantic coast. This exercise brought together more than 12,000 individuals across the whole community to examine the ability of all levels of government, private industry, and non-governmental organizations while testing and validating plans and initial lessons learned from last year. FEMA also coordinated with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico on a series of workshops, seminars, and functional exercises in June to prepare for this hurricane season.

On October 5, 2018, the President signed the Disaster Recovery Reform Act into law. Key provisions in this law enable greater investment in pre-disaster mitigation; support efforts to reduce risks from future disasters after fires; increase state capacity to manage disaster recovery; and provide greater flexibility to survivors with disabilities. FEMA looks forward to continuing to work with our Federal, SLTT, and private sector partners as we continue to implement this legislation.

### **Conclusion**

The 2017 and 2018 hurricane and wildfire season continue to shape the future of FEMA and emergency management. By utilizing best practices, adopting new response concepts, and training all emergency management partners to the same standards, we can achieve the goals of building a culture of preparedness and readying the nation for catastrophic disasters. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions you may have.