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TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Oberstar, Ranking Member Mica, and distinguished members of the Committee for allowing me the opportunity testify before you regarding the State of Florida's level of preparedness for the 2009 Hurricane Season. I am Ruben D. Almaguer, the Deputy Director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management. I currently serve as the Deputy Director for the Florida Division of Emergency Management, appointed by Governor Charlie Crist on January 2, 2007. I oversee the day to day operations of the agency, including direct supervision of the function areas tasked with preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation and finance and administration. I previously served as a Division Chief and Paramedic for the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department, the sixth largest fire service in the nation, for over 20 years. My hands on emergency management disaster experience including responding to over 25 local, state, national and international disasters including earthquakes, bombings, floods, and hurricanes in Venezuela, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Turkey, Taiwan, and Africa. I also responded to the Oklahoma City Bombing, the 9/11 Pentagon Attack, as well as Hurricane's Andrew and Katrina, among others.

Emergency management is built upon three very basic concepts: 1) All-hazards preparedness is the foundation in which readiness is built for all disasters regardless of the cause or size; 2) The emergency management cycle includes preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation; and 3) All disasters are local. In Florida we take great pride in being prepared to respond to the people of our state and other state's in need when called upon. In 2009, our team truly feels we are better prepared for the upcoming hurricane season than ever for the following reasons:

Professionalizing Emergency Management

- In response to the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, the State of Florida has taken a more aggressive and active posture towards hiring more qualified professionals to manage disasters including emergency management professionals from the local, state and federal level.

In State Commodities–System for Distribution

- The State Logistics Response Center opened in Orlando, Florida in July 2007. Currently the 200,000 square foot facility houses over $16.2 million in direct relief supplies (water, meals, tarps, cots, bedding etc.) through state, federal and private partnerships.

Technological and Infrastructure Improvements

- In 2007 the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) in Tallahassee enhanced and updated our technologies as well as added 47 positions to the operational layout of the facility in order to

ensure that a unified structure was in place for coordination with FEMA from the inception of a disaster, as well as technology to provide the latest mapping and the ability to secure video feeds and still photos from the field for key decision makers.

Outreach and Preparedness for the Disability Community

- Creation of a Statewide Disability Coordinator position in the Division of Emergency Management. This has resulted in collaboration between individuals with disabilities, advocates and emergency management officials in all aspects of emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

Catastrophic Planning & Exercise

- The State Emergency Response Team since 2006 has participated with FEMA in a Catastrophic Planning process based on a scenario identical to the Great Miami Hurricane of 1926. This process has allowed the state to engage partners from private sector as well as the state, local and federal levels in the planning process for a disaster that today could cause the State of Florida to incur damages of more than $150 billion dollars. This planning process will culminate in the largest hurricane exercise in Florida's history to be held May 28-29 and June 1-3 statewide.

Public Education and Outreach

- Continued public awareness and preparedness campaigns have been expanded to focus on children. In 2009 the Division launched a website for children statewide that educates them in a non-threatening educational forum on how to prepare themselves and their families for a disaster. The website is located at www.KidsGetAPlan.com.

Experience and Coordination Equal Success

- Ongoing coordination and partnership with our federal partners at FEMA and local emergency management programs in Florida. Over the past year Florida has actively engaged with FEMA in various planning scenarios, training opportunities and exercises that improve collaboration and teamwork between our agencies. Additionally, through disasters during the past year such as Tropical Storm Fay, Hurricane's Gustav and Ike, and the recent North Florida flooding those planning, training and exercises paid off with exceptional teamwork between the State of Florida FEMA, local government and our private partners. The utilization and best practices from these experiences have provided a strong foundation for future disaster responses that will build on these past successes.

There are several key areas that I wish to discuss with you today:

1. **Balancing local, state, and federal disaster response;**
2. **Building Effective Mutual Aid ;**
3. **Embracing the "survivor" mentality;**

BALANCING LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL DISASTER RESPONSE

As previously pointed out, Florida takes the mindset that all disasters are local. This does not mean that during a disaster the state waits for local government to fail, it is more of an acknowledgement that the majority of resources available to assist with disasters are available through interstate or in some cases intrastate mutual aid at the local level of government. Fire, police and emergency management

capabilities at the county and municipal level many times may augment the need for state and federal assistance during a disaster. Florida has a wide range of counties with different capabilities and resources. Recently during the flooding throughout North Florida we were successful in integrating teams from other counties and municipalities into the Emergency Operations Centers of many smaller counties who lacked the personnel to maintain 24 hour operations. This type of response leads to partnerships and exchanges of knowledge and information that have a great inherent value to both parties as they return to normal operations following a disaster and when the next disaster strikes.

The State of Florida always stands ready to support local response efforts when the capacity of local governments and their mutual aid resources are well on their way to, or have been depleted. It has been proven repeatedly that the most effective response is one that begins at the local level and grows with the support of surrounding communities, the state and then the federal government. This approach provides communities with the most effective and timely results, which ultimately lead to saved lives, protected property and communities getting back to normal as quickly as possible following a disaster.

When local and state governments coordinate their efforts and their emergency plans are in sync, this will ultimately lead to a diminished need for taxpayer money from the federal government for relief. However, in its haste to "lean forward," the federal government could overwhelm the ability of local and state governments to conduct preparedness, response and recovery activities. Such preemptive action leads to the suffering and lack of balance needed between the three levels of government to engage in planning for emergency response. We should not create an overdependence on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the federal response, it is not realistic and it lessens ability of local and state governments to be willing to take ownership of their disasters in the future. All involved must be mindful of and willing to accept their responsibilities and provide support through a thoughtful and balanced approach to responding to disasters.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE MUTUAL AID

The response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 resulted in the largest deployment of interstate mutual aid in the nation's history through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). EMAC deployed personnel comprised of multiple disciplines from all member states to respond to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Texas. The process enabled National Guard, search and rescue teams, incident management teams, emergency operations center support, building inspectors, law enforcement personnel, and other disciplines to immediately assist the requesting states in need of support. The National Guard even chose to continue under EMAC when deployed under Title 32 because of the organization, liability protections, accountability, and tracking abilities EMAC provides. It is important to note that over half of the resources provided by Florida through EMAC were resources provided through the local level.

After Hurricane Katrina the State of Florida, acting under provisions of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact and as a result of a direct request from the Governor of Mississippi, deployed a self-contained response team on the day of landfall to the impacted coastal area of Mississippi (3 coastal counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson; 3 contiguous inland counties to the north consisting of Pearl River, Stone, and George). By the evening of landfall on August 29, 2005 assets of law enforcement, firefighting, search and rescue, medical, Incident Management Teams, and others were in the area of operations in coastal Mississippi performing lifesaving, safety, and security missions. Major logistical assets were sent to the area, as well, to include ice, water, food, fuel, and other commodities to support

initial response operations. Due to the dire situation caused by Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi coast, the mission of the Florida Task Force grew significantly and commodities and personnel continued to flow from the State of Florida continuously until the end of October 2005 (note: some smaller level missions continued with Florida support up until November 2006).

Continued support of EMAC will allow Florida and its local governments to focus on the implementation of lessons learned from prior disasters and other EMAC missions such as training and education for all mutual aid stakeholders, resource typing and credentialing, and information and resource management. It is imperative that we continue to build effective interstate and intrastate mutual aid capabilities with local governments. History is a clear indicator that local governments provide a great deal of the commodities, personnel and teams used to assist their neighbors in state as well as out of state for larger scale intrastate mutual aid in responding to disasters. This cooperative spirit among sister states must go both ways and by building relationships during these events this becomes more probable. By utilizing the strengths of each state's programs mutual aid can always be a viable answer to address the needs of those people impacted by disasters.

EMBRACING THE "SURVIVOR" MENTALITY

As Florida has worked with FEMA in undertaking its catastrophic planning initiative over the past few years, it has become readily evident that there are not enough resources at the local, state or federal level to deal with a catastrophic disaster. As we have written these plans and debated how we don't have enough search and rescue teams, how we don't have enough mobile kitchens, how we don't have enough supplies to adequately serve the numbers that would be necessary during a catastrophic disaster we have lost sight of and written out our most important resource following a disaster: those who survive it.

In previous disasters the media and our society has been quick to label the people left behind to pick up the pieces after a disaster as "victims," as if they are unable to check on their neighbors, assist in cleaning up their community and take an active role in getting life back to normal for themselves, their neighbors and their families. Our society has created "the culture of the victim;" the conviction among residents that the first fallback after a disaster is government aid. Victims actually are those that we unfortunately lose during a disaster and while we mourn their loss it is imperative that our nation begin to create a culture of "survivors" whereby we work to empower those people remaining after a disaster to get actively involved in their community recovery efforts and to work daily alongside local, state and federal officials. This investment in their communities and the development of a "survivor" mentality pre-disaster as well will create a culture whereby people are actively involved in preparedness activities and training for disasters. Then when a disaster hits these "survivors" will act as a force multiplier to assist communities in recovering. In a catastrophic event, there is no doubt that a response based strictly around a local, state, and federal response and recovery will fail. Such a response will end up with more victims, many communities may never recover, and the economic impacts on local, state and the federal government will be dire.

We must immediately begin to instill on a national level that people must get involved and prepare and after a disaster strikes use their gifts and skills to assist their community in recovering. This type of response where neighbors help neighbors and communities are actively engaged and invested in the rebuilding of their lives will always be more effective than any amount of aid or funding the government can bear.

CONCLUSION

It all starts with the leadership and in Florida that starts with our Governor Charlie Crist, who has given me a clear mandate to take care of the people of Florida. With the passage of the Post-Katrina FEMA Reform Act, Congress has affirmed their support for ensuring preparedness for our nation's continuous vulnerability against all-hazards. We must continue to build national preparedness efforts with a multi-hazard approach involving all available resources. Instilling the "survivor" culture that was previously discussed will be imperative as we continue to refine and exercise plans for a catastrophic disaster. It is clearer than ever that a government only response to a catastrophic disaster will fail miserably. We must write our residents back into our plans and intend to use them as a resource and not view them as victims, but survivors who are engaged in the recovery process and not waiting for the government to fix everything. We must continue to involve and utilize the resources of private, faith based, and volunteer organizations as well. We cannot afford to continue to repeat history as we did with Hurricane Andrew and Hurricane Katrina. We must, once and for all, learn the lessons of the past and resolve ourselves to ensure that local, state and federal governments continue to have adequate funding for baseline emergency preparedness so exercises and training can ensure that plans and systems are effective before a disaster. Public awareness, education and training also have to become a greater focus. The use of survivors as a force multiplier to support and aid in the response and recovery from disasters will only serve to improve outcomes for communities following a disaster.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee today and want to affirm Governor Crist's dedication to continually working with our federal partners to improve the nation's capabilities to respond to all types of hazards that our communities may face on a daily basis.