

Statement of
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“Improving the Nation’s Response to Catastrophic Disasters:
How to Minimize Costs and Streamline our Emergency Management
Programs”

Before the

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and Emergency Management

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

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Good morning Chairman Denham, Ranking Member Norton, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am honored and appreciate the opportunity to testify today from the perspective of a local emergency manager on this important topic. On behalf of the nation's local emergency managers, I would like to thank the committee for your support of the Emergency Management Performance Grant and the vital role the committee played after Hurricane Katrina to strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA). We need strong emergency management at the local level, but we also need strong partners at the state and Federal level for those events that are beyond our capacity.

My name is Gary A. Christmann, and I am the Commissioner of the City of St. Louis Emergency Management Agency Department of Public Safety. The Mayor of the City of St. Louis is Francis G. Slay. I am a member of the US Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA). IAEM-USA is our nation's largest association of emergency management professionals, with almost 5,000 members including emergency managers at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector. Most of the members are city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks. The membership includes emergency managers from large urban areas as well as rural areas.

The City of St. Louis is 62 square miles made up of residential areas, industry, business, transportation, three major league sports teams and we are the third largest inland port in the nation. As a local Emergency Management Commissioner, I have the over-all responsibility to coordinate the all-encompassing all-hazard disaster planning system including the four phases of Emergency Management – preparedness, response, and recovery, and mitigation. All phases of the system are coordinated with hundreds of partners including all levels of government, volunteer agencies, hospitals, medical facilities, private industry – including the chemical industry- colleges, universities, sporting venues, faith based organizations, and our citizens. We are also heavily involved in coordinating with multiple modes of transportation including surface, rail, pipeline, air cargo, and barges. The City of St. Louis, and the surrounding area, is vulnerable to a number of hazards – including natural, technological, and homeland security related incidents. Severe weather and flooding are our most frequent threats. However, we prepare for the full range of threats – from those that happen with great regularity to those with catastrophic potential. The majority of our response and recovery operations are done with our own resources and our local partners. As a local Emergency Manager, I recognize that all incidents start on the local level and end on the local level...but I know that we need all of our partners for a successful response and recovery. The catastrophic event will require the resources of all levels of Government but will remain the responsibility of the local Emergency Manager.

My responsibilities include planning for – among other things – a catastrophic earthquake involving both the New Madrid and Wabash Valley faults. We face many challenges with our planning due to the uncertainties of such an incident. Our planning has to embrace the earthquake's magnitude, location of the epicenter; the time of day, the day of the week, and the season of the year, which will influence our response and recovery. We recognize that a catastrophic earthquake will cause wide spread damage, power outages, mass casualties, and mass fatalities. Our missions will include mass care and sheltering, search and rescue, debris removal, security operations, mass casualty and fatality management just to name a few. The only way we can be successful in a response of this magnitude and complexity is to have a fully functional and tested system of emergency management in place.

The City of St. Louis will be participating in the National Level Exercise 2011 (NLE 11) in the near future. This exercise is organized around an event on the New Madrid fault line. The consequences of such an event could be catastrophic. In April 2008, our jurisdiction experienced a magnitude 5.4 earthquake in the Wabash Valley fault area. This event caused minor damage to bridges, foundations, and buildings throughout the City of St. Louis. This event accelerated the city's public outreach campaigns and training – primarily Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. I would like to recognize the great state of California for creating this program.

I want to thank this committee for their strong support of the Federal investment in the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG), which is under the jurisdiction of this committee. As you well know, this grant funding has a 60-year history of providing basic emergency management capability at the State and local level. Unlike the Homeland Security grants, EMPG requires at least 50 percent non-federal match and has annual performance requirements. EMPG allows us to sustain our system by providing matching funding for the personnel at its foundation as well as additional capabilities. This helps to fulfill the original rationale behind the creation of EMPG, which is there is a federal interest in developing emergency management capability at the state and local levels of government. The stronger the emergency management system at the state and local levels of government, the more efficiently Federal resources can be deployed to events beyond the capability of state and local governments.

The St. Louis regional area continues to work to build a comprehensive capability to respond to and recover from all incidents. The regional partners working through the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant have created and are maintaining response teams, plans, and resource trailers ready to respond to the needs of our citizens and guests. The City in partnership with the regional partners has also established CERT training which is now part of Citizens Corps to provide disaster preparedness training to our citizens and businesses. We have used every mode of media available to us to communicate the need for personal preparedness so that those who can help themselves and their neighbors will and we can focus our attention on those who can not help themselves. However, we continue to struggle to get our citizens to embrace personal preparedness.

Like many of you, St. Louisian's were shocked by the recent tragic events in Japan and our thoughts and prayers go out to their citizens as they continue the difficult process of response and recovery. We are monitoring the situation in Japan to gain knowledge and lessons learned from their experience. This will lead to further examination and strengthening of our plans. We always review and modify our plans in light of actual occurrences regardless of where they occur.

The City of St. Louis has long had an interest and concern about earthquakes and other potentially catastrophic disasters. That is why we have been engaged in an active training program for first responders, emergency managers, other key emergency response partners, and the public. Much of the training we offer is the field training courses provided by the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which is also under the jurisdiction of this committee. We have also emphasized working, training and exercising with the personnel at sports venues and large gathering venues in our area. One of our constant concerns is that 65,000 fans rooting for the Rams in Edward Jones Dome could be at risk if a disaster happens during a game. In 2006, we organized a full-scale disaster simulation with the Cardinals baseball team. I believe this exercise qualified as the largest in the Midwest – involving over 4,000 simulated victims, and over 3,000 first responders, first receivers, military partners from the 7th Civil Support Team, the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force from the United States Marines, and other emergency personnel including the staff of Busch Stadium.

Given the risks, we feel a good warning and communication system is vital. As an example on December 31, 2010, a severe weather outbreak spawned multiple tornadoes in the City of St Louis and other surrounding jurisdictions before moving into Illinois. When the debris settled there was one death and a number of injuries. We want to say a special thanks to the National Weather Service for providing nearly 45 minutes of advance warning. This enabled us to activate our outdoor warning system, our mass media notification system which sends text and email to those who have signed up, coordinate with local media partners to provide life saving warning information to our citizens, and activate our local incident management team. We have remained in almost constant operations due to two additional tornado warnings, an ice storm, and blizzard warning since that time. Our public information coordinated through our local media and notification systems has continued to prove beneficial to our response and recovery. I would like to publicly thank our local media for embracing our public information campaign for awareness and situational briefings for our citizens.

In the past five years, the City of St. Louis has responded to and recovered from several hundred small and large incidents. We received two federal declarations during this period, one for shelter and care of Katrina evacuees and one for the 2006 severe storm that produced 75 MPH winds during a heat emergency and caused a region wide power outage.

Before closing, I would particularly like to thank this committee for the vital role it played in the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA). PKEMRA returned preparedness to FEMA and clearly made the Administrator of FEMA responsible for leading the national effort of preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery for all aspects of disasters and emergencies.

Conclusion

In summary, Mayor Francis Slay, the City of St. Louis, and the nation's local emergency managers, have appreciated the support of this subcommittee in the past in building a strong emergency management system at the Federal, state and local levels. The investment in the Emergency Management Performance Grant is small given the potential return in creating a strong state and local emergency management system, which handles a large majority of disasters. The absence of such a system will inherently add costs and lower the efficiency of Federal assets deployed to a disaster. At the local level, we continue to work with all partners to prepare and respond to those events which happen most frequently while we work to prepare for those which would have the greatest consequence to the nation and the communities we serve.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.