

**Testimony of Phyllis Little
Director of Emergency Management
Cullman County, Alabama**



**And Member
U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA)
Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency
Management
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
July 14, 2011
On
FEMA Reauthorization and Cutting the Red Tape in Recovery**

Chairman Denham, Ranking Member Norton, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic.

I am Phyllis Little, Director of Emergency Management for Cullman County, Alabama. I have served as a county government emergency manager for 16 years. I am also a member of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA) and am providing this statement on their behalf.

IAEM-USA is our nation's largest association of emergency management professionals, with 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 our members are U.S. 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.

We deeply appreciate the continuing support this Subcommittee has provided to the emergency management community, particularly your strong support for the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG), the Emergency Management Institute (EMI), and for strengthening FEMA.

As emergency management director for Cullman County, I am responsible for planning, training, exercising, coordination of response activities, coordination of initial recovery activities, and mitigation activities for the County and its eleven municipalities. Together our key stakeholders including law enforcement, public works agencies, paid and Volunteer Fire Departments, Emergency Medical Services, hospitals, the American Red Cross, faith based organizations, and private industry develop emergency response plans for the county. We also work closely with our mutual aid partners and the state emergency management agency to be sure our plans mesh well with those around us. These plans are exercised as discussion based table top exercises up to full scale simulations in the field to make sure they are adequate for our needs.

I also have the responsibility to share information with newly elected local officials about their responsibilities and where they fit in during the response to a disaster. We have also trained nearly 300 volunteers in the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. In addition, my office coordinates the training for emergency responders on the Incident Command System (ICS) and offers training as necessary for elected officials on their disaster-related responsibilities and Continuity of Operations.

Besides weather issues, I am the point of contact and county liaison to the Alabama Department of Homeland Security. I have additional responsibilities in the coordination of outside resources providing assistance and support in the search for missing persons, and to coordinate response resources for hazardous materials incidents.

Cullman County was one of the original parties to the creation of the Northern Alabama Mutual Aid Association. This association was created in the 1970s because resources were not available equally in all counties and through this we could pool all of our resources and offer assistance across County lines. When an emergency or disaster happens – whether it reaches the level of a Presidential declaration or not – my office is responsible for coordination of emergency response and any outside resources needed. It is widely recognized that all disasters are local. Without strong local emergency management offices to begin the response and move into recovery, it would cost much more at both the state and federal level. The problems have to be recognized and addressed as early as possible.

Since 2005, Cullman County has received five Presidential declarations for tornadoes, flooding and for hosting evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav.

I would like to continue our discussion by describing our recent experience with tornadoes – talking about our preparations in advance of the storm, its impact on our community and the immediate and short term recovery issues in the aftermath. I would then like to address some of the challenges we faced through this process. I'd also like to describe some of the areas where the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has shown improvement. We are far enough into the recovery phase of our disaster to begin thinking about mitigation issues, and I would like to address them as well.

Our Tornado Experience

Cullman County has a rich German heritage and a population of 80,406 residents. The County is located in rural central north Alabama between the large cities of Birmingham to the south and Huntsville to the north. Interstate 65 and the CSX Railroad bisect the county. The primary businesses in the area are agriculture based: row crop farming, poultry, and cattle. Our largest employer is a Wal-Mart Distribution Center located in the City of Cullman. The county is serviced by 25 volunteer fire departments and 2 municipal fire departments. The Emergency Operations Center is located in the City of Cullman and has been activated 31 separate times since January 1 for severe weather.

I would like to describe some of the events in our county related to the tornado outbreak on April 27, 2011. The cities of Hanceville and Cullman, the largest of our eleven municipalities suffered catastrophic damage due to tornado touchdowns.

The city of Hanceville was struck at approximately 6:00 a.m. and the city of Cullman at approximately 3:00 p.m. Over a 12 hour period, we were under a total of 13 tornado warnings. The National Weather Service mapped 5 tornado touchdowns; two being rated as EF-4s with wind speeds of up to 200 miles per hour. Approximately 500 homes and 100 businesses were damaged or destroyed. To add insult to injury, electrical power was lost to most of north Alabama for 5-7 days. Not only were we faced with the devastation from the tornadoes, now we were faced with an energy crisis as well. North Alabama is served by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). A large section of their major transmission line system was destroyed. Large generators had to be brought in to keep water systems and other critical infrastructure from failing. County-wide curfews were initiated to stem looting and to keep citizens safely away from the damaged areas.

Residents could not purchase basic necessities because pharmacies, grocery stores and gasoline stations had no electricity to operate. A few were able to open within 72 hours with limited generator power and supplies could be purchased with cash. Funds could not be accessed through banks, credit or debit cards because these required electrical power and functional communications to operate. Many areas of Cullman County were

without power for up to two weeks due to damage to the electrical distribution infrastructure.

Emergency response in Cullman County went well. One reason for this was that we started briefings about the potential for severe weather 3 days in advance of the tornadoes with information supplied by the National Weather Service (NWS). We conducted our initial briefing for our emergency responders and elected officials on Friday, April 22, and every day up until the 27th. We activated our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at 2:30 a.m. on April 27 following the issuance of a Tornado Watch. As we received information about how serious this outbreak was expected to be, we were in constant contact with our key emergency stakeholders – including our local school officials. As a result of this information sharing, school officials were able to make the decision to postpone the opening of school that day and delay the school bus routes. Other emergency responders – like Cullman County Emergency Medical Services – were able to preposition their assets in multiple locations to enable quicker emergency responses as well as protect critical assets that would be needed following the storm. Updates were provided throughout the day by the Huntsville NWS and communicated to all stakeholders. Had we not been able to provide this vital information to school officials, emergency responders, and the public, I am positive we would have suffered more than the 2 fatalities we did experience. One clear example of this is that the school busses would have been beginning their routes in Hanceville at the time the tornado struck there.

Why did we do as well as we did in the response? While no one can say with absolute certainty, I believe a large portion of the credit goes to the strong local emergency management system we have in the county, which has brought together key stakeholders to make sure plans are in place, trained on and exercised in advance of an actual emergency or disaster. The majority of the credit for this belongs to funding supporting emergency management activities from the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG). Cullman County received approximately \$49,000 in EMPG funds for FY2010. This funding (24% of our operational budget) allowed us to keep a 2 person office operational, in addition to maintaining 22 of our 42 outdoor warning sirens. EMPG is truly the life blood of our EMA and others across the country. EMPG is different than the Homeland Security grants, in that it demonstrates a true partnership between local, state, and federal government and requires a 50 percent cost share.

County-to-County mutual aid was effective and activated almost immediately. Alabama Emergency Management began to provide assistance and FEMA was on the ground by the fourth day. Recovery is underway at this time and the community is beginning to rebuild.

Our partnership with private enterprise – the Wal-Mart Distribution Center – also provided assistance after we were struck by the tornado. Their employees volunteered to help the community recover. Their facility has contributed to the resilience of our community by being pre-wired for back-up generators. Generators can be brought in to quickly restore power to the facility and get it back in operation.

Cullman County was fortunate that only three public buildings were destroyed. These included the Cullman County Economic Development Agency, Emergency Medical Services, and a volunteer fire station. However, major damage to the roof of the county courthouse has had an impact on the operation of our District Court. Because the temporary roof repairs have experienced some failures as the result of subsequent storms in our area, water damage continues to occur in our courtrooms, making a decision necessary almost daily as to whether the courts will operate or not. Permanent repairs have been delayed due to the time necessary for insurance settlements. Several schools have minor to moderate damage, with one having major damage to the gymnasium. At this time, all schools in the county are set to open on time for the fall session. Statewide, many schools were completely destroyed and officials are unsure of the status for the fall session which begins just after the first of August.

Johnson Crossing Volunteer Fire Department facility was destroyed – only the fire apparatus was left standing after the storm. FEMA has provided a temporary facility to house the Engine until a permanent structure can be rebuilt.

Challenges

Many challenges have come to light during the interim. Perhaps the two greatest challenges for local government to overcome have been debris removal and unexpected financial outlays. Let's discuss debris removal first.

Debris removal is a life-safety, health and economic development issue. We have to have roads open to get emergency response vehicles into damaged areas in order to complete search and rescue operations and to provide emergency services to those who need them. We have to be able to get utility vehicles in to shut off gas and electricity to prevent further damage and loss of life. After that, we still have life-safety issues with the debris as folks are trying to recover or check on property or trying to start repairs. "Leaners and hangers" (broken tree branches) are an issue. While they might not have been broken sufficiently by the original event to fall completely to the ground, they may do so in the afternoon thunderstorms Alabama experiences this time of year. This could lead to additional injuries. Debris has to be removed from the community to begin the process of bringing it back to life. This is essential to the local economy. In addition, the debris is also a fire issue in congested areas where there is structural damage and vegetative debris

on top. This is also the time of year for rats and snakes. When you have debris and food items in damaged structures you have rats and snakes and other critters. In this area we have several indigenous poisonous snakes—rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cotton mouth water moccasins.

FEMA, using the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), has initiated a pilot program called Operation Clean Sweep in Alabama. The purpose of the program is to enable property owners in communities with or immediately adjacent to areas of catastrophic or extensive destruction to apply for assistance to remove debris from their private property to help them get back in their home or get the site ready to rebuild their home. They must submit a right of entry form to the Corps. Given the extensive amount of debris, it is a great concept. However, the pilot program has not been without its problems. Many of these challenges can be attributed to inconsistencies in the interpretation of the program concepts and information provided to local officials who are responsible for the program implementation. Guidelines were not fully available when the program was introduced and much of the information presented at the local level was more speculation than fact. The use of satellites to assess areas with qualified damage has proved to be inconsistent and extremely slow. Afternoon thunderstorms prevent satellites from seeing damage due to cloud cover. As a result confusion and disappointment has been rampant at the local level. Better coordination along with clearly defined policies, definitions of debris, and areas of operations provided up front would be extremely beneficial. Ground assessments by teams that include local personnel with knowledge of the areas affected would be more accurate. Delays in initiating the program have resulted in communities being unable to experience the full benefits. Although the program was approved early in the disaster, due to the delays, the actual program to assist residents with debris removal did not begin in Cullman County until 10 days ago. At midnight July 11, the cost share jumped from a 90/10 to 75/25 rate. The increased cost for local government will likely be the deciding issue as to whether the county continues to offer that assistance to residents. We applaud this effort by FEMA to speed recovery, but urge they continue to work with state and local stakeholders to identify and correct the challenges with this potentially great and much needed program.

Spanning the gap between debris removal and finances is the issue of Cullman County's choice to use the Corps for debris removal – primarily because of the magnitude of damage from the tornadoes. Overall approximately 450,000 cubic yards of debris has been removed in Cullman County and the areas less affected have been totally cleared. Statewide approximately 500 million cubic yards of debris have been removed. Local elected officials across the State of Alabama have been inquiring about the average cost per cubic yard for debris clearance done by the Corps. They need this information to make informed decisions before entering into contracts. This information has proved to

be near impossible to capture. The question was pushed forward in Cullman County prior to May 15 when debris removal began and no cost figure was provided until near the end of June. Providing a “working figure” at the beginning of a mission would allow elected officials to make better informed decisions when entering into contracts eliminating much of the apprehension and indecision at the local level. This in turn will speed up the recovery process. In addition, this is a standard piece of information furnished by private contractors engaged in the debris cleanup business and is typically required before entering into a contract with a unit of local government.

In a time when the poor economic situation had already required budget cuts for several years, a disaster of the magnitude that occurred on April 27th has had a devastating financial effect. Financial outlay for the extended overtime, as well as fuel and other unexpected expenses has drained local coffers. A clear illustration of this can be found in the annual overtime budget for my office – which totals \$1,800.00. Overtime expenses from April 27 thru May 20 exceeded \$12,000.00 for two employees – or a 666.67% budget overrun. This data reflects only one department in my County government. Local law enforcement agencies were required to provide security for business, including pharmacies and banking institutions on a 24-hour basis due to the massive power outages. This required extended overtime for all employees. Because of the tremendous drain on the finances of local governments, perhaps this committee will consider the possibility of a block-type grant based on the estimated cost or a portion of the estimated cost of the declared disaster. This “early” availability of funds could be provided up front to assist jurisdictions jump start their recovery. Some of these funds could be used to pay eligible overtime costs and those unexpected but eligible expenses that occur during a response of this type. The amount of that assistance “advanced” could then be deducted from the final reimbursement to the local jurisdiction. Keeping government services operating has a positive effect on the local economy.

Delays in insurance settlements have affected both local governments and residents.

FEMA Individual Assistance, including housing assistance to residents, has been delayed due to “red tape” and the confusion caused by the FEMA denial letters received by residents. Many do not understand the process or find it so cumbersome that it discourages them from seeking further assistance. A revamping of the denial letter sent to applicants to clarify the process for seeking further assistance and the importance of returning the SBA applications is long overdue. A streamlining of the overall process is needed to provide the assistance required by residents. FEMA has recognized this issue and is holding workshops to assist residents with the complicated process, but perhaps simplifying the process in the future would have a more positive effect. The Individual Assistance programs are an important part of the recovery process. Alabama residents are not asking for a “hand out” just a “hand up.” Working together federal, state, and

local officials can insure that the citizens receive that “hand up.” As a result communities will be stronger and more resilient when the next disaster strikes.

Improvements

There are a number of things we think FEMA should be commended for in their actions related to our tornadoes. The practice of assigning a FEMA liaison directly to each County has been extremely beneficial. This has greatly enhanced the flow of information and coordination. We recommend this as a “best practice.”

Another improvement in FEMA’s response has to do with locating the Joint Field Office (JFO) closer to where the disaster occurs. In our case, it was set up in Birmingham. In addition, divisions were created throughout the state, and representatives were put in each. This has been very helpful. If division can’t fix an issue, then it goes to the JFO. The division covering our County is located in Huntsville. There are Alabama EMA personnel, FEMA personnel and Corps personnel all working from there. This has made it easier to get clarifications on issues that have generated questions or need an interpretation.

FEMA has also been helpful in getting expedited project worksheets for Emergency Protective Measures in our two hardest hit municipalities. This was greatly needed and very much appreciated.

Our County Commissioners will be meeting with FEMA to discuss available options including possible assistance under the Community Disaster Assistance loan program. . Local officials are also meeting with the FEMA long term community recovery staff. We will be appreciative of any initiatives that FEMA can offer.

Mitigation

As our community continues to move toward recovery, we have a number of ideas and projects to pursue.

Our Cullman County Emergency Medical Services is planning to build a new permanent facility. We are discussing the value of submitting an application to fund the construction of a safe room as a part of this facility. One reason this is important is that the dispatcher for EMS remained at her station broadcasting calls for help even as the building was falling down around her. She continued to remain at her station until the communications tower with the EMS antenna on it was destroyed and she could no longer broadcast calls.

The facility occupied by the Cullman County Economic Development Agency was also destroyed in the tornado. Plans are underway to construct a new permanent structure for this agency – and we are also considering including a safe room in this facility as well.

In addition to the regular responsibilities associated with economic development, this agency has become a valued part of the emergency management system in our county because they have the staff to assist people in making applications for individual safe rooms as they begin to rebuild.

In the last five years or so, we have had a very positive experience with safe rooms – particularly in a community setting. The town of Garden City installed a community shelter / safe room containing five pods connected by tunnels. This facility has the ability to provide shelter for the entire town.

One opportunity for improvement in mitigation is making at least a portion of the post disaster mitigation funding available as early in the process as possible. People are beginning to make decisions now about rebuilding. They want to know whether they can qualify for funding to build safe rooms in their homes and other facilities. If they go ahead and start construction now, they will be ineligible for the grants when they become available.

Our newspaper indicated on July 8 that the Economic Development Agency has received applications from over 200 residents interested in building safe rooms as a part of their homes. It seems easily possible that these residents could lose interest in such a project if it takes 6 to 18 months to find out if money is available. And, that wait would also delay the recovery of our community.

Authorization

In addition, I would like to add that IAEM-USA supports the authorization of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) and the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue program. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) is the agreement between all fifty states ratified by Congress that provides form and structure to interstate mutual aid. EMAC works well to get the right resources to the right place in time to conduct emergency rescue and response in the impacted area. Alabama's counties were able to provide resources to other Gulf States through EMAC within 48 hours. However, some states have had problems with the reimbursement process. For example, Cullman County opened a shelter under EMAC to house evacuees from Hurricane Gustav in August 2008. The last reimbursement claim for approximately \$40,000 for shelter security was not paid until January 2011. That may not seem like much money to some people, but to a small sheriff's office it was a budget buster.

Conclusion

In closing, the damage from tornadoes in our community has been severe, although not as bad as some of the other areas of Alabama. Nonetheless, this experience has provided some challenges to us, not the least of which is debris removal and economic impact on governmental budget issues. FEMA has made a number of improvements in their response to the tornadoes, including providing forward placement of JFOs and the assignment of FEMA liaison officers to impacted counties. A joint venture between FEMA and the Corps called Operation Clean Sweep could have great impact on speeding recovery of our communities, but FEMA needs to continue to work with its key State and local stakeholders on the challenges communities are facing.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony, and I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

Contact information: IAEM, 201 Park Washington Court, Falls Church, VA. 22046

Witness: Phyllis Little, plittle@culmanema.org

Government Affairs Chair: Randy Duncan, RDuncan@sedgwick.gov

IAEM Policy Advisor: Martha Braddock, braddock@iaem.com

Phyllis A. Little

Director, Cullman County, Alabama

Emergency Management

Phyllis A. Little has served as the Emergency Management Director of Cullman County, Alabama since 2003, although she has served the County in a variety of posts since 1995. She also serves as the Homeland Security point of contact for the County. Little has also been a member of the Jones Chapel Volunteer Fire Department for more than 20 years, although she is currently on inactive status.

Phyllis has been involved with nearly a dozen Presidential declarations of disaster in her time with Cullman County, ranging from Hurricanes to Winter Storms, Ice Storms, Tornadoes, and floods. In addition, Little has been deployed to Florida and to the Alabama State Emergency Operations Center to provide support and assistance through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). Her experience in emergency response and coordination extends from the coordination of grants for special equipment, to searches for missing persons, to hazardous materials incidents and more.

Phyllis has been a member of the Alabama Association of Emergency Managers since 1995 and a member of the North Alabama Emergency Management Mutual Assistance Association. She has served in various leadership capacities in both associations including board member and legislative committee member. She has also served as a member of the Alabama State Fatality Management Committee since 2006. She is a member of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers.

She has both the Advanced Emergency Manager Credential and the Certified Local Emergency Manager Credential from the Alabama Association of Emergency Managers.

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE*Truth in Testimony Disclosure*

Pursuant to clause 2(g)(5) of House Rule XI, in the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include: (1) a curriculum vitae; and (2) a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness. Such statements, with appropriate redaction to protect the privacy of the witness, shall be made publicly available in electronic form not later than one day after the witness appears.

(1) Name: Phyllis Little

(2) Other than yourself, name of entity you are representing:

U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA)

(3) Are you testifying on behalf of an entity other than a Government (federal, state, local) entity?

YES

If yes, please provide the information requested below and attach your curriculum vitae.

NO

(4) Please list the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by you or by the entity you are representing:

(1) This is to support the Certified Emergency Manager program and integration of NIMS into CEM content. (It also supports raising the professionalism of emergency managers via a benchmarking program, and is making possible our online application

2008-09	\$160,000
2009-10	\$170,000
2010-11	\$185,000

2) Contract to assist with the Citizen Corps Conference

FEMA Office of Community Preparedness

Total Budget = \$205,000

September 2008-August 2009

Signature

Date

July 13, 2011