FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks at the 2023 National Hurricane Conference

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Good afternoon, it is great to be with you! I am so excited to be here!

I would like to thank the National Hurricane Conference organizers for the invitation to join you.

And I am so honored to speak alongside John, Jamie, Casey, and Kevin who are such great partners to FEMA.

Looking back on recent years, we have spent a lot of time talking about unprecedented disasters.

Disasters that have broken record after record – that have upended the lives of millions – that have rewritten history for countless communities.

But perhaps, we have not spent enough time talking about how these disasters have pushed us to work smarter, pushed us to forge new partnerships and pushed us to lead in a whole new way.

That is why today, I want to reflect on the evolution of emergency management– to reflect on the way we have adapted in the face of this adversity – and to challenge us to act and build upon this progress to protect future generations.

And I want to set the stage for our discussion by telling a story that took place in this city 18 years ago.

A story which proves that even with decades of change, there is one critical aspect of our business that remains the same. The human element.

Some of you may know Marty Bahamode.

Marty has been a staple of FEMA External Affairs for 31 years, and time and again, has been called upon for his calm voice and steady hand in times of disaster.

This was especially true on August 29, 2005, when he boarded a Coast Guard helicopter for the very first flight over New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Marty was one of the first few people to see the devastation left behind by one of the deadliest and the costliest hurricanes in our nation's history. A hurricane which left 80 percent of the city flooded and displaced an estimated 1 million people across the Gulf Coast region.

After that life-changing flight, Marty stood in front of local leaders relaying the heartbreaking news.

Disbelief, shock, and overwhelming sadness drew tears from nearly everyone in the room.

Marty saw the reality set in for those people that their city, and their lives, would be changed forever.

And for hours, in a tiny, crowded room huddled over maps, Marty worked alongside the mayor, city officials and emergency managers not just as someone from FEMA, but as a fellow American committed to helping them navigate the challenging road ahead.

I bet some of you here today have stories like this from that day, as well. So, I encourage you to spend this week talking to each other – learning from each other – and to never forget that helping people – that the human element – is the most important aspect of why we do, what we do.

I mentioned a few moments ago that I wanted to reflect on the evolution of emergency management. And I think one of the most significant advances we have witnessed is how we handle information.

From the ways we capture, share, and absorb information, to the platforms and methods we use to communicate –the rapid advancement of technology has changed the way we move throughout our professional and personal lives.

Just think of the minicomputers in our pockets that can tell us anything we want to know – or the smart watches that remind us to breathe – or the cars that can practically drive themselves.

These are all tools that have made our day-to-day lives easier. But when it comes to the way we work, such as the way we prepare for hurricanes, we depend on the people behind the data to help us get boots and boats in the right places.

From the hurricane specialists at NOAA who study satellite imagery and computer models – to the U.S. Air Force Reserve and hurricane hunters who fly planes into the eye of a hurricane – to the experts who translate what this information means – emergency managers depend on those really smart people and their data to help us make decisions.

And during Hurricane Ian, it was really smart people and data that helped us get the right people and the right stuff to the right places.

Through the first multi-agency deployment of geospatial resources to the field, first responders had drone video and images, and most importantly, actionable intelligence, to aid in their search for survivors.

We saw these efforts take place predominately up and down Fort Meyers Beach – one of the most devastated areas in southwest Florida.

This reconnaissance enabled a strong whole of government response through a constant flow of situational awareness from the beach to the command post to the EOC to Washington D.C.

This is important because as we continue to bring together diverse teams from across various organizations to solve these problems, we have got to be on the same page.

I would like to recognize the State of Florida, the Missouri Boone County Fire Protection District, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, the Civil Air Patrol and FEMA for the partnerships they forged and the lives they helped save.

And there was another notable “first” taking place a few states away.

Chief Scott Olsen, from the Boone County Fire Protection District, a 30-year veteran of FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue program and sponsoring agency chief of Missouri Task Force 1, was testing out something new.

After responding to Hurricane Ian through an interstate mutual aid request from the State of Florida, Chief Olsen utilized the Missouri Disaster Situational Assessment and Reconnaissance team, or DSAR, in a full-scale field exercise in Georgia.

The DSAR team's FAA drone pilots, GIS specialists, and data analysts were not only supporting responders with land and air imagery, tracklogs and waypoints, they were also simultaneously live streaming the drone imagery and data back to the teams exercising at the Missouri State EOC.

This real-time reconnaissance aided search and rescue decision making, rapid needs and damage assessments, and threat and hazard identification to not only the local incident management team, but regional and state decision-makers as well.

However, in a perfect world, no one would need to be rescued. But with nearly every major event, people are caught off guard and need our help.

Tragically, many of the Hurricane Ian-related deaths were people over the age of 60. Whether it was a lack of transportation, or mobility issues, or simply not having anyone to count on, people stayed behind.

The risks that older adults face during a disaster is a serious concern for us and is one of our focuses headed into this hurricane season.

Our biggest concern is that we have not yet built bridges to the vulnerable populations who need our help the most.

For instance, over the years, we have seen an improvement in emergency planning for older adults who live in nursing homes and assisted living centers. However, only a combined four percent of older adults live in these types of facilities – the vast majority live in their own homes.

And by 2034, adults aged 65 and older will outnumber those under 18 for the first time in U.S. history.

This means our work to prevent this kind of tragic loss comes at a critical time. We must take a hard look at the people living in the most at-risk communities and get to work directly engaging them.

So, today, my call to action to you is this: Let's get the messages that save lives into the hands of those who need it most.

When it comes to older adults, let's tailor our outreach in a way that reaches them – but we first must know how to get there – and the first step is simple.

We can start by talking to our loved ones, neighbors, and community members to learn where they get their trusted information.

Maybe it's the local newspaper, radio, TV, or social media.

Maybe its church, community centers, beauty salons or barber shops.

We will not know until we ask. So, let's pick up the phone and knock one some doors, because with just a few short months to go until the start of hurricane season, our efforts to prevent the preventable and protect the vulnerable have never been more important.

But when we only have hours and minutes before disaster strikes, our ability to effectively alert and warn any threatened community is of utmost importance.

FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System, or IPAWS, remains one of our most effective tools for instantaneous and targeted communication.

Since 2012, and through 5 million emergency alerts, people in harm's way have been provided with lifesaving information that kept their families and themselves safe.

And although we have come a long way since the program's inception in 2012, we are keeping our eyes on the horizon.

Our vision for the future of IPAWS is to create a universal alerting eco-system where people can be reached over any medium that can communicate information.

And this work has already begun.

For example, FEMA is working with technology providers across entertainment, automobile and home and building industries who can adapt their technology to support alert and warning.

We are also focused on encouraging streaming media providers to carry these lifesaving alerts on their platforms.

And finally, we are enhancing and refining how embedded rich media leverages the Common Alerting Protocol to improve alert information and geotargeting.

These are just a few of the steps we are taking to enhance the program's capability and reach through utilizing the tools and modern technology available to us today.

It is safe to say emergency management has advanced, but what is the driving force behind the evolution?

I would say, it is our number one threat – climate change.

According to NOAA, 2022 delivered 18 weather or climate disaster events in the U.S. with losses exceeding $1 billion dollars each.

And for every dollar represented in these damages is a family– a small business owner –a local community, that were catapulted into a new normal.

Unfortunately, as highlighted in last month's report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), without immediate action, these events will continue to increase in their frequency and intensity.

However, the hope for building climate resilience is not lost.

As Friederike Otta, one of the core writers of the IPCC report stated:

"It is not that we are depending on something that still needs to be invented. We actually have all the knowledge we need. All the tools we need. We just need to implement it."

So, what does that mean for all of us in this room?

It means that the power to affect generational change in the way we build climate resilience is up to us.

It means that the time is now to have tough discussions about addressing the future threats we can expect to face.

At FEMA, we are helping communities nationwide with this effort in a few ways:

From moving an unprecedented amount of mitigation dollars out the door and into the hands of communities – to providing technical assistance to under resourced communities traveling their mitigation journey– our goal is to help the nation make big and bold moves toward climate resilience.

From reinforcing and rebuilding critical infrastructure like power and water systems – to elevating, retrofitting, and buying out flood prone properties – to adopting modern, lifesaving building codes –thousands of communities are acting on their commitment to make this nation safer for future generations to come.

And I call on us to build on this commitment and act, too!

Let’s take what gifts these decades of change have given us and use them for good.

Let’s capitalize on the opportunity modern technology offers us and work smarter, not harder.

Let’s be ambassadors for preparedness and climate resilience in the communities in which we thrive and love.

Let’s be the bridge to delivering help to the people who need it most.

Because I know that we all have the power to make this world a safer and stronger place.

We just need to use the tools in front of us to build the future that the next generation deserves.

Thank you.