

# FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to the NEMA 2021 Annual Forum

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Thank you everybody -- it's great to be here.

I appreciate the hospitality from Ms. Merick, and congratulations to Erica Bornemam, the incoming NEMA president. I know we will all benefit from your leadership. I also want to say how good it is to be here with the state directors and say thank you for your support both during my confirmation and these initial months of my tenure at FEMA.

There's so much experience in this room. There's so much we can learn from one another. And that's important, and related to the two major themes I want to discuss with you today.

The first is the way our role as emergency managers is evolving and the second is how the risks we are facing are expanding.

## **Our Expanding Role**

I'm sure many of you have a similar story. No matter how or when you started in emergency management, your career has been shaped by disasters. We're a part of a profession that learns, grows, and evolves from each successive experience.

After every major disaster, the field of emergency management changes. The "big ones" are more than just historic events – they also represent the markers of fundamental changes in our field.

For example, just over fifty years ago, a devastating fire season in Southern California led to the creation of FIRESCOPE, which eventually evolved into ICS.



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In 1985, the Los Angeles City Fire Department created a program to better train civilians and prepare communities for disaster after seeing the devastation of the Mexico City earthquake. That program – the Community Emergency Response Team or CERT – became a national program in 1993 and continues to grow nationally and internationally.

Twenty-nine years ago, in 1992, Hurricane Andrew struck Florida, making history as one of only four Category 5 storms to make landfall in the United States. This event led to the creation of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact.

And twenty years ago, the September 11 terrorist attacks shifted our focus toward man-made threats and opened the door to an unprecedented increase in preparedness funding. Our grants for emergency management and homeland security activities quadrupled almost overnight. Local and state emergency management offices were able to hire staff, buy equipment, build out emergency operations centers, and begin training in a way that would have been inconceivable a year before.

Sixteen years ago, Hurricane Katrina and the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act changed the way we approach catastrophic response, creating new authorities to act early and reinforcing the need for mitigation and recovery planning.

Next October will mark a decade since Hurricane Sandy, which resulted in legislative reforms that spurred FEMA to drastically improve the efficiency and quality of our disaster assistance.

And, with the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act, we finally began to allow Federally recognized tribes to directly request a Presidential declaration.

Major disasters and incidents in our field have always been a catalyst for change. After every incident, we reflect and learn and remake our profession to be stronger, more dynamic, more mature, and more capable.

This is good, it's healthy, and it's part of our culture. Now, I believe, we are on the cusp of the next evolution in our role.

We've been battling a pandemic for more than a year now. We've used words like "unprecedented" and "historic" so often about COVID these words are losing their



meaning.

Yet, COVID is fundamentally re-shaping our society – the way we live, the way we connect, and the way we work. This is especially true for our nation's first responders and those on the front lines.

For the emergency management community, COVID is only one aspect of the ongoing transformation of our field.

We've always been ready to roll when the bell rings, but we're now being asked to organize, coordinate, and manage resources across a larger spectrum of sectors.

For example: The COVID pandemic has pushed many of us into the public health sector in ways we've never been involved before.

I know many of your governors expected you to coordinate and synchronize other agency activities. When this happened, most of us – myself included – were confronted with solving problems that were well outside the scope of what we've done before.

Beyond COVID – many of you are also seeing your resources drawn into the opioid crisis, tackling homelessness, dealing with social unrest and the consequences of domestic terrorism, the impacts of cybersecurity breaches, and numerous other types of crises.

And of course, there's climate change, which is turning the storms, floods, and fires that we manage into profound, long-term, cascading incidents.

All of us – every one of you in this room - have taken on additional roles and responsibilities during the last few years.

We do it because it's in our DNA as emergency managers. We help people and, frankly, other organizations and professions do not have our skillsets.

No one else sees the larger picture like we do. Emergency managers are uniquely positioned to see the way our systems are stretched because we coordinate across sectors.



Emergency managers have always been a “jack-of-all-trades” and we embrace that – we always have – but each of us can read the writing on the wall.

We are facing increasing expectations to manage risks that have traditionally been outside our role.

## **The Expanding Risks**

Now, we know why the expectations on us are increasing – its driven by the expanding risks our country is facing.

For example, the Western United States is literally on fire. Smoke from fires in Oregon blotted out the New York City skyline. The wildfire risk has become such a perpetual problem, there is no “wildfire season” anymore. It’s a year-round crisis.

Earlier this year, I visited the National Interagency Fire Center where I was briefed on how fires are arriving earlier, moving faster, and burning longer.

In fact, at the time, the National Interagency Fire Center had just elevated to preparedness level 5 – the highest level of wildland fire activity – which was the earliest that level had been reached in the past decade.

Hurricanes and other severe storms are becoming more intense, more damaging, and deadlier.

Hurricane Ida retained its strength as it crossed over nine states in four days – leaving damage in its wake from the Gulf Coast to the New England region.

In 2020 alone, there were 22 weather and climate disaster events, each with losses exceeding \$1 billion across the United States. This shattered the previous annual record of 16 events that occurred in 2011 and 2017.

It’s not only the size and severity of the events, of course. The recovery time for communities that have experienced a disaster is growing longer; it takes more time to get them back on their feet because the impacts are stronger. And this is further complicated with repeat events in places that are already struggling to recover.



For example, I visited Lake Charles, Louisiana, earlier this year, a community that faced Hurricanes Laura and Delta within a two-month span. This community is struggling to recover even now. The mayor laid out in stark terms the challenges with housing shortages and the city's fragile infrastructure, and the continuing impacts to the local economy. Recovering from back to back disasters is hard enough, but it's exponentially harder in the midst of COVID and the ongoing threat of more hurricanes.

We know the risks in front of us are growing, and they are interacting with each other in a way that makes our vulnerabilities greater.

We all are living these impacts every day in our emergency operation centers. And, the nation we serve is seeing it play out in real time on television and through social media.

We're seeing change – tremendous change – in both the landscape of risk and in our professional roles.

### **So, what to do?**

So, what must we do in the face of expanding risk and evolving roles? How should we react to change?

I believe the only option is to embrace this shift – embrace the way our roles are evolving and the way the risks are expanding. We do what we do best, lean on our experience and expertise and step into the future, define it, and lead the way.

The first way we do this is by taking partnerships a step further. Success in our business hinges on collaboration, on relationships, and on partnerships. This principle is embedded in the fiber of what we do each day.

We know the power of partnership between individuals and organizations – we rely on each other and help each other out. We've depended on EMAC for decades to support one another and – right here at this conference – we're sharing best practices and 'lessons learned' to build those relationships that matter during disasters.

But we need to take that a step further. What we need now is the partnership of systems.



For example, we found out we need the public health and emergency management systems to be more intertwined. During COVID, we worked with our public health counterparts, side-by-side, day in and day out.

We knew we needed closer partnerships with public health before COVID. Many of us participated in pandemic planning and exercises together – so this was not a surprise.

But we discovered that it wasn't just knowing or even understanding what the public health does, but that our success depended on integrating our systems with theirs.

I often think about this partnership of systems as interoperability. Our system of emergency management must be interoperable with other systems – not just adjacent, but capable of seamlessly operating with other systems within the community.

Everything that makes a hazard a “hazard” is linked to all parts of our community: The economy, the environment, public health, education, and social services.

These systems are each unique and complex, but it's the way they interact that makes a community function.

The way forward for emergency management is the same – we need to export our well-honed interoperability to other systems, and we need to import those capabilities to improve our own systems in risk management.

Let me explain what I mean.

We all know that our relationship with the private-sector and non-profit leaders are mission critical; especially when we're in active response. Those relationships are important to us because those partners can act and support in ways government cannot.

We can offer the structure, perspective, and leadership but it's imperative we leverage the systems already in place to stabilize the incident and position the community for a strong recovery.



When a local partner comes to the table with a solution, say addressing the need for hot meals after a disaster by using locally sourced food and jobs, this “partnership of systems” generates a ripple across a community. Fully functioning kitchens – our local businesses – get the support they need, whether that is food or power, to turn back on faster.

The result: People are fed, restaurant owners and staff are working, and the entire community benefits from this approach.

In another hypothetical, say a faith-based leader offers to rally their congregation to help with transportation needs or childcare for their immediate neighborhood. They leverage their network of people in a position to offer support – be it their time or reliable transportation – to address a core need of those who require specialized support.

The result: People can get back to work and get the support from those in the community they know.

And, think of the strong systems that exist that connect groups of people to each other. I’m referring to peer-to-peer and neighbor-to-neighbor networks that our communities rely on and leverage every-day to get information on resources and to stay connected. Understanding these networks and how they work within a community can create a new pipeline for us to deliver important information.

The result: More people are connected to lifesaving information during the full disaster lifecycle and their reactions are more welcoming because they heard it from someone they know and trust.

These efforts and so many other examples like them become a force multiplier throughout the community.

When people have their fundamental needs met, they can stay and fix their homes – they don’t need to leave. Instead, they can continue to do business in town and restart the economy. They can send their kids to school and begin to do the other things that help a community move faster through the recovery process.

This type of work goes beyond traditional partnerships. When we plug our efforts into existing systems, the result is exponentially greater. Which is exactly what we need to be ready for the complex challenges we’ll face in the future.



The second way we step into the future is by evolving our approach to climate change.

The impact of climate change goes beyond stronger hurricanes and severe storms or record temperatures. The greatest risk comes from the cascading effects propelled by the changing climate.

We must gain momentum against this challenge by investing in resilient infrastructure. Now more than ever, we need a systems-based approach in the mitigation space.

The actions we take or do not take to combat climate change at this pivotal time will be judged by future generations. Our harshest critics will be the emergency managers in this room fifty years from now.

A recent study found that if the planet continues to warm on its current trajectory, the average 6-year-old will live through roughly three times as many climate disasters as their grandparents.

This is the intergenerational impact of climate change. And it's why all of you are more important than ever in this moment. We must move away from incremental mitigation measures and focus on large projects that protect infrastructure and community systems.

I recognize the value of a house-by-house approach to mitigation. We know buyouts have saved billions over the years and reduced untold suffering. And all of us know grants to homeowners for flood or fire mitigation are worthwhile investments.

We do not need to discard what has worked in the past. But we need to shift our attention toward smart investments in system-based, community-wide projects to protect larger groups of people.

What would this look like? One example would be working with our state, and local leaders to implement the stronger building codes that we know can break the cycles of disaster damage and reconstruction. This is a low-cost, high-impact solution that saves \$11 for every dollar invested.





This also means focusing on the future risk, as well as being guided by historical patterns of disasters past.

Just like an incremental approach, historic data is valuable. We create many of our plans and exercises based on historical risk, which still needs to be part of our conversation.

But the future is going to look very different than the past. We must have a more deliberate conversation about what our future risk is going to be. What hazards do we think we're going to face in 10, 15, 20, or even 30 years from now? What can we learn and project from the trends we see now? What steps can we take now to start to reduce those impacts?

We've taken some big steps toward making this a reality. I am thrilled with the successes we've had so far with our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program and our Hazard Mitigation funding.

We were able to get \$3.46 billion in Hazard Mitigation funding through the COVID declarations. This followed an additional \$1 billion in BRIC dollars, which is twice what was available last year.

These are big dollars. System-level, major investment dollars that will allow your communities to tackle larger projects – projects that will have greater impacts and a bigger return on investment.

For example, a proposal from Princeville, North Carolina – the oldest town incorporated by African Americans in the United States – was selected for review for funding this year. It's for an innovative new mitigation project that incorporates nature-based solutions that weave natural features and processes into the built environment, so that we are working with nature, instead of against it.

And, I'm very proud we've made changes to help ensure funds go to historically underserved communities. We've improved our technical assistance capabilities for those applying for funding to ensure more places like Princeville receive support. It's just a start, and we have more to do.

With these funds, we have an unprecedented opportunity for mitigation in the face of climate change and our expanding risk.



These funds are creating space for community-wide, systems-based mitigation projects which will make a difference for years – and generations – to come.

## **Next Steps**

So where do we go from here?

I've asked my team at FEMA to be bold. To be innovative. And to think in a systems-based way. I am asking you to do the same.

In this moment, we are positioned to move toward bigger-picture, future-based planning.

At FEMA we are currently developing our next 5-year Strategic Plan. And a core idea behind this plan will be a people-first approach. The idea that ultimately disasters are about the people who experience them and the people who respond to them.

When we talk about managing risk, this isn't abstract: We are talking about our families, friends, and neighbors. We are also talking about our kids, grandkids and all those who will inherit what we leave behind.

I've challenged my team to put people first in everything we do at FEMA. That includes both our external programs and our internal workforce. Because if we're not helping people, then what are we doing? The further we drift from a people-centered approach in our work, the further we drift away from positive outcomes.

To that end, we are making changes to advance equity in our program delivery.

You know as well as I do that certain populations are disproportionately impacted by disasters. Systems that foster inequality serve no one, especially in times of crisis.

It is our responsibility to recognize what's in front of us and to act.

At FEMA, we're taking up the mantle of reducing barriers and increasing access to Individual Assistance, and we've already made progress.



So when I arrived at FEMA, I already knew I wanted IA to make improvements. Our staff is passionate about helping survivors – especially our IA teams – and our processes should reflect that. Our IA program must be driven by a compassionate, survivor-centric perspective that meets people where they are.

We've made progress in improving our IA program. So far this year, FEMA expanded the forms of documentation accepted to prove ownership and occupancy. This was critical for applicants who lack certain legal documents for inherited property.

We are also now providing a limited amount of financial assistance to renters and homeowners to help them sanitize and clean up their homes after disasters.

And, FEMA expanded its financial assistance for disaster-caused disability.

Additionally, we're not going to be satisfied with assisting only those who seek us out. We are going to embrace the idea of meeting people where they are.

We must actively identify and reach out to underserved communities that need our help the most. Understanding and addressing barriers, gaps and the rich historical and cultural context of our communities helps us ensure that ALL survivors are supported.

We've done this with our Funeral Assistance program, for families who lost loved ones due to COVID. And this philosophy was at the foundation of FEMA's Pilot Community Vaccination Centers mission.

At FEMA, we're building a diverse and inclusive workforce that resembles the communities we serve. Equity, diversity, and inclusion starts with our own workforce, to ensure we have the talent that will bring different insights, experiences, and perspectives to the decision-making table.

I hosted a roundtable last week with all the leadership of FEMA's employee resources groups, our Women's group, seasoned employees' group, Tribal group, African American group and beyond. I am learning so much about the depth and breath of the FEMA workforce and how we can tap into this extraordinary potential in new ways.



However, building equity into our FEMA processes is not just about writing new policies or hiring a more diverse workforce. It's also about continually and deliberately choosing to use an equity lens in everything we do.

For all of us – no matter if we're responding to a flooding event, or pre-positioning commodities, or setting up vaccination clinics – good intentions alone are not enough.

We have to meet people where they are.

If certain communities are more at risk for death, injury, property losses, and suffering, it's incumbent on us to prioritize those communities. This includes communities of color, older adults, people with language barriers, people with disabilities, people experiencing economic hardship and those living in rural communities.

Putting people first is what we do instinctively in our jobs. Most of us are here because we're committed to public service. But bureaucracy – certainly something we know a little about at FEMA - can distract us from our purpose. We must keep ourselves and our teams centered on the people we serve.

To that end, I've asked our Grants team to do a thorough, equity-based review of all of FEMA's grant programs, from top to bottom. I want to ensure there are no "blank spaces on the map" in terms of where the support is flowing, especially for our non-profit communities and our tribal partners.

This review isn't just about where the money goes, but also how it flows. Is the grant in-line with what the end user needs? Do the grants fit the needs of the people who are doing the work?

It's not enough to just push money out the door. If the process is too cumbersome, the funds are not going to go where they are most needed.

Our grants are some of the most important ways FEMA supports our state and local emergency managers, as well as Tribal Nations and territories, and I want those programs to be strong, effective, and people-centered.

To support this people-first approach, I'm also pleased to announce that my team is developing a new exchange program to bring more state and local emergency



managers in to provide their expertise to FEMA's program offices.

Many of the professionals at FEMA came from local or state emergency management, but it's easy to lose that perspective. We want to make our programs stronger and better connected to those we serve, but we can't do that without you.

I need your help as we make changes to FEMA's programs. We need your perspective on how our programs and policies affect your offices. Are there things we can do to make our processes easier? More streamlined? More effective?

I don't want our decisions to be made inside the DC bubble because we all know that the true innovation of our industry happens beyond the beltway.

This is an opportunity for us to work together and make positive change to exponentially improve our outcomes.

As a profession, what we do next matters. We cannot lose sight of the support we need from our public officials back home.

We have so many opportunities in front of us – to reimagine our systems, evolve our work and build-up our teams. After the last few years – after all that we've been through and achieved – the window is open for us. Now is the time to advocate for what we need to strengthen the field of emergency management and our communities.

## **In Closing**

Just like previous disasters have triggered positive change, how are we going to turn this moment into action that will transform the future?

When I look around this room, I understand the hard work, study, and sacrifices that brought you to where you are today. And the sacrifices your families make so that you can serve others.

I want you to know I will work tirelessly every day to support you, to have your back, and to make sure people understand the talent and skill it takes to do your jobs.



Together, we are going step into increasingly challenging situations and uncertain times. I know that our emergency management system – from the local first responders on the front lines, to the EOCs across the states and Tribal nations, to the team at FEMA – will do what needs to be done. We always have and we always will. Our communities look to us to tackle the challenges of today, and those of tomorrow.

So, let's build the interoperability we need to cross disciplines and create connections our communities need to build a resilient future. Let's invite in those we do not yet know and rethink the ways we work with our most steadfast partners. Let's leverage the lessons of the past, while also looking toward the future.

None of this will be easy, but if you wanted easy, you wouldn't be in this room.

As you can tell, I'm extraordinarily proud of my team's work at NY OEM during COVID. They exemplified the best of emergency management, just like your offices did throughout the pandemic.

We saw – and continue to see – emergency managers doing what they do best: being ready, being adaptable, demonstrating resilience and serving humbly. There are not many places where we can find people like you.

I, for one, am glad that you have taken on this mission.

I am optimistic that we can do the work that can transform the trajectory of our path and deliver on the calls to expand our role and meet the evolving risks head on.

I know that we have leaders like you all around the nation who are ready to make a difference. I am counting on you to help us meet this challenge.

Thank you.

