

The Role of FEMA and Emergency Management in COVID-19 Response

Release Date: Th3 16, 2021

STATEMENT

OF

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

HOMELAND SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WASHINGTON, D.C.

"The Role of FEMA and Emergency Management in COVID-19 Response."

Submitted



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March 16, 2021

Chair Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Robert Fenton. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss FEMA's role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an unprecedented challenge that has claimed the lives of over 500,000 of our friends, relatives, and neighbors across America, caused grave damage to the global economy, and put a spotlight on inequities throughout our nation.

At FEMA, we are committed to advancing access and equity in the vaccination program. This is our highest priority. To accomplish this goal, we are executing the President's National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness with the help of our federal, state, local, tribal and territorial partners.

As of March 11, 2021, 101.1 million vaccine doses have been administered across the United States with nearly 83 million of those taking place since President Biden was inaugurated. Furthermore, under the President's leadership, the Administration began providing states and



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territories with a new dashboard depicting allocation projections with a three-week forecast. As of March 9, this weekly allocation stands at 15.85 million doses which is a 70% increase since the President took office.

Today, I'd like to discuss what we are doing, what we plan to do in the months ahead, and what challenges lay ahead. Our current work can be grouped into three broad categories.

First, at the President's direction, FEMA is reimbursing 100 percent of the cost share for Title 32 National Guard forces, as well as 100 percent of eligible emergency protective expenses incurred by states, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through September 30, 2021. This includes reimbursement for vaccination efforts, COVID-19 screening, and personal protective equipment (PPE). The President's memorandum of January 21, 2021 also expands the eligibility of entities that would qualify, including schools, child-care facilities, healthcare facilities, non-congregate shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transit systems impacted by COVID-19. FEMA is coordinating with federal partners to finalize the specific eligibility criteria. Further, on February 2, the President directed FEMA to make reimbursements for expenses incurred retroactive to the beginning of the disaster. Taken together, these measures represent a substantial increase in assistance to our SLTT partners, and we look forward to working with this Subcommittee to ensure that this effort will be adequately funded.



Second, FEMA is working to support SLTT-led Community Vaccination Centers (CVCs) through the deployment of federal clinical and non-clinical personnel; the provision of equipment, supplies, and technical assistance; and the awarding of expedited financial assistance to states, tribes, and territories. We are also procuring Mobile Vaccination Units (MVUs), which, when paired with staff and supplies, can each support administration of 250 or more vaccines per day.

Third, FEMA has teamed up with the Department of Defense and other agencies to establish CVC pilot sites. These pilot sites are stood up in partnership with state and local authorities who are working side by side with faith based and community organizations to better reach underserved and historically marginalized communities which have a high risk of COVID-19 exposure and infection. The sites are selected based on analysis of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index and other Census data as well as input from our partners. These federally supported CVC pilot sites come with an additional vaccine allocation that is above and beyond the normal state allocation and can administer up to 6,000 vaccines a day. Initial pilot sites are operating in California, New York, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania and Illinois.

As of March 12, FEMA has obligated more than \$4.28 billion for COVID-19 vaccination efforts, and supported 731 federally supported vaccination sites, including 100 mobile units, since January 20, 2021. FEMA has now deployed 1,842 staff across the nation to support vaccination



missions. Secretary Mayorkas has activated the Department of Homeland Security's Surge Capacity Force for vaccination support operations, drawing on federal employees from other federal agencies to augment FEMA's workforce. This is a whole-of-government effort.

In everything we are doing, across the three lines I've just described, we are striving to ensure equity. President Biden has made equity a cornerstone of his Administration's COVID-19 efforts, and at FEMA, we established a Civil Rights Advisory Group (CRAG) within the National Response Coordination Center to ensure that equity is incorporated into all activities. The CRAG is led by FEMA's Office of Equal Rights and includes personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC, and the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, among others.

Since its inception on January 29, the CRAG has supported the development of the methodology used to determine federally led CVC pilot site selections, and has worked on the ground in all ten FEMA regions to collect and analyze demographic data, identify underserved communities, and collaborate with community-based organizations. We have also incorporated Regional Disability Integration Specialists into the CRAG to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are integrated in all facets of vaccine center operations. I would further note that DHS and its Federal government partners fully support equal access to the COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine distribution sites regardless of immigration status.



While FEMA remains focused on supporting vaccination distribution efforts and the COVID-19 response, the agency also maintains its mission readiness and ongoing support for multiple emergency and disaster declarations. The most recent examples are the severe winter storms that caused widespread damage in Oklahoma, Louisiana, and particularly Texas. FEMA actively coordinated with impacted state, local, and tribal governments to address unmet needs and support state partners in the distribution of critical resources such as generators, fuel, blankets, water, and meals. Following Texas's major disaster declaration and approval for Individual Assistance, FEMA is ensuring financial assistance to eligible individuals and households in Texas who have uninsured or underinsured expenses for serious disaster-related damages.

Operating in overlapping disaster environments creates additional challenges within already complex mission requirements. For example, in the case of these recent storms, more than 3,000 vaccination centers were located in areas that experienced power outages, and FEMA worked with our state partners to ensure they were able to reopen every facility as quickly as was safe to do so. FEMA's response was complicated by the imperative of ensuring that both those affected by these winter storms and agency personnel were protected from COVID-19.

As we look ahead to the spring and early summer, FEMA has a particular interest in ensuring that vaccines reach as many people as possible before we enter hurricane and wildfire seasons. Climate change is making natural disasters more frequent, more intense, and more destructive, and we must be prepared for another challenging series of disaster events this



summer and fall.

Last year, FEMA faced a record-setting number of hurricanes and major wildfires. While the agency responded successfully to each of these natural disasters, COVID-19 makes any response and recovery effort more difficult. Widespread vaccination is essential to improving our posture to respond to natural disasters.

We have reason to be hopeful in the months ahead. We expect that vaccine supplies will continue to increase substantially in the months to come. FEMA is working with other federal agencies and our SLTT partners to ensure that vaccinations can proceed as quickly as those increased supplies allow, so that every member of the public who wants a vaccine will have access to one. We are also working to amplify messaging from the Ad Council, which is coordinating with federal partners to encourage vaccination for individuals who may be hesitant to get vaccinated.

As we take stock of the work that lays ahead of us, we know that FEMA will need additional resources from Congress. We greatly appreciate this Subcommittee's steadfast support for FEMA's efforts throughout this COVID-19 pandemic and for providing the resources our agency has needed to meet these historic mission requirements. I would like to thank Congress for recently appropriating \$50 billion to FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund within the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to cover the costs associated with major disaster declarations, including the ongoing battle against COVID-19.



Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.

