

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks on the U.S. Approach to Crisis Management

Release Date: 5? 3, 2022

Good morning.

Please allow me to begin by extending my warm regards to all of you. I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank Minister Verlinden and Director General Raeymaekers for inviting me to participate in the Directors General Network meeting.

While I was invited to deliver remarks on the U.S. approach to crisis management, I'm also here to listen and learn from my European colleagues to expand my understanding of Europe's unique approach to crisis management.

As the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, I lead a team of more than 20,000 dedicated employees to handle any type of crises, disaster, threat or hazard facing our nation.

Our mission is simple: We help people before, during and after disasters. This mission is straightforward, but the execution is complicated. Our world is dynamic and complex. There are new threats on the horizon and the potential consequences continue to increase.

But our mission remains the same, it's helping people, pure and simple. And it's this mission and ethos that guides how we approach crisis management.

Our mission keeps us focused on the disaster survivor and communities at risk, but we can't do it alone. FEMA is just one part of a large team that consists of our other federal civilian agencies, the military, non-profit organizations, and thousands of state and local emergency managers across the country. The key to our success lies in the relationships we have with our partners as well as those we



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serve.

Our capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a crisis is exponentially increased when these relationships are strong. It takes all of us working together to meet the needs of our nation.

Today, I want to talk about how these relationships influence our work before, during, and after disasters.

The media loves to focus on the disaster or crisis itself, but we all know that the best disasters are the ones we prevent from occurring. In many ways, what happens before a disaster strikes is far more important than how we respond.

We must build sustainable, long-lasting resilience so our communities and our nations are able to withstand disasters and are ready to respond and recover from whatever the future holds.

We know the threat landscape is changing. We are seeing direct impacts of climate change on the severe weather events we are experiencing. We no longer have disaster seasons. We are busy year-round. This past December we responded to one of the largest tornadoes on record in Kentucky and two weeks later responded to an unprecedented grassfire that, driven by 100+ MPH winds, destroyed over 1,000 homes in a matter of hours.

Our reliance on technology has created increased vulnerability to cyber-attacks. Terrorist attacks have evolved into domestic violent extremism. And the last two months have shown the world we live in can radically change everything we thought we knew about stability while we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most notably, Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has caused a massive humanitarian crisis. The bombardment of Ukraine's cities and critical infrastructure is taking a terrible toll on Ukraine, its government, and citizens, displacing more than ten million Ukrainians from their homes. As everyone here knows, the costs and consequences extend far beyond Ukraine. I applaud Europe's united response to this crisis, including accepting millions of refugees fleeing Ukraine.



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President Biden, Vice President Harris and the entire Administration are committed to countering Russia's aggression and providing military, economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine, including welcoming up to 100,000 Ukrainians and others fleeing Russia's aggression.

Ukraine is the ultimate example that shows the threats we face today are different than what we faced 10 years ago. And they will be different than what we will encounter 10 years from now.

That's why we must make generational investments to build a more resilient nation against all hazards. Not just the hazards that are familiar or what we've experienced in the past.

A central component of our crisis management is to reduce future risk and build capacity. This means building a strong foundation for long-term, sustainable decision-making. For example, we know that communities that adopt modern building codes will avoid billions of dollars in damage over the next 10 years. We know that every dollar invested in mitigation saves \$6 dollars in future disaster losses.

How do we do this nationwide? We invest in the future through funding, training and education.

President Biden has made funding for mitigation projects, especially those that will reduce the impacts from climate change, a top priority. Our Agency has been given more than \$5 billion for hazard mitigation, which will strengthen infrastructure in communities across the country, funding projects that will reduce future losses from floods, hurricanes and severe weather.

As our communities think about their mitigation projects, they look to many of your nations that have proven, project after project, decade after decade, that our built environment can adapt to the changing climate.

At the individual and household level, our focus is providing tools and resources to help people understand their risks and make decisions that will protect their families in the future. Since flooding is the largest hazard we face in the U.S., yearly losses are topping more than \$17 billion now. We invest heavily in risk communication through our National Flood Insurance Program and our new Risk



Rating 2.0 system that allows Americans to see the risks to their state, community, and home.

In addition, our teams push funding and materials to individuals and communities through our Ready.gov platform, which provides risk information on all hazards and easy-to-understand steps for building individual preparedness. The Ready Campaign uses social media to share hazard-specific messages to a wide variety of audiences, with eye catching graphics, video animations, and simple tools like checklists to help families and small businesses understand their risks and take action.

We also invest heavily in planning, training, and exercising with our emergency management partners at all levels of government. Like many of you, we do National Level Exercises every two years, and our exercise in 2024 will be focused on climate change consequence management

We provide funds to increase their capacity and interoperability, bolster communications and technology, and sustain a strong emergency management footprint in their communities.

Our investments are not just about dollars. It's about investing in our partners, understanding their hazards and their unique needs. We're not only investing funds, but we're also investing time in building relationships that lead to long-term resilience.

Our goal is to invest more in what we do before a crisis, so we don't have to respond as often, and when we do, our recovery is less complex.

In the U.S., we often say all disasters begin and end locally. No matter the type of disaster and no matter how long it lasts, it is the community itself that lives with the consequences. This philosophy drives our focus toward building capacity within even our smallest communities.

But this is also why the emergency management enterprise, the full scope of the emergency management system across the country, is so important.

With the increase in severe weather and aging infrastructure, some communities within the U.S. are not able to respond to incidents on their own. These communities will request support from their state governments, but when state



resources are exhausted, FEMA will step in to support the incident response and recovery operations.

During a disaster, we work with affected states to rapidly stabilize the incident, focusing on critical services and functions. For notice events like hurricanes, we aggressively pre-position our resources and prepare for the worst. We would rather have the resources in place and not need them, than need them and not have them.

This forward leaning approach includes staging commodities at strategic locations near the affected area. We have millions of meals and liters of water, blankets, tarps, and generators all stocked in our distribution centers and ready to ship at a moment's notice.

When a storm makes landfall, our focus shifts to survivor-centric actions like search and rescue; care and feeding; short term shelters and temporary housing; and providing funds to families for home repairs and other post-disaster needs.

All the while, we are aggressively working to restore critical sectors, like energy, communications and water, so the community can get on the road to recovery as quickly as possible.

This is where FEMA is just one part of the team. Last fall, Hurricane Ida came ashore in Louisiana and made its way across nine states over four days, leaving a trail of destruction more than 1,500 miles. Five of our 10 FEMA regions were engaged, but the breadth of the disaster meant we had to call on every partner we could.

In our National Response Coordination Center, we had the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the American Red Cross, the Departments of Energy, Transportation and Agriculture, and 20 other partners sitting together – solving problems, finding solutions, and moving resources – to support those states and communities affected by Hurricane Ida.

It was this collaboration that allowed us to respond to the immediate needs of the hurricane in the midst of COVID. At the time, Louisiana was suffering from a surge in cases, and we knew widespread power outages put the entire healthcare system at risk.



Prior to landfall, we worked non-stop with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Defense to develop a crisis action plan to stabilize infrastructure, conduct patient movement, and execute large scale medical evacuations.

We needed to be ready to manage multiple, concurrent complex incidents, and we needed our partners at the table. The relationships we built during this planning effort before the Hurricane Ida directly contributed to the speed of the response operation, and it smoothed the way as we transitioned those Louisiana communities toward recovery.

The recovery phase of a disaster can be complex and dynamic. Helping communities rebuild after a disaster presents numerous challenges, but also unparalleled opportunities.

Some of the biggest steps forward we've taken as an Agency and as a country have been in the aftermath of a disaster. We've seen firsthand that the window of opportunity for sustainable growth and meaningful change is uniquely open after a crisis, for both disaster-affected communities but also for our own agency through the lessons we've learned.

With that in mind, our recovery team at FEMA has been leveraging these opportunities to increase assistance to disaster survivors, as well as improve the way we incorporate hazard mitigation within our recovery programs.

For example, over the past year, we've been taking a hard look at our recovery programs. After several hurricanes went through impoverished areas, we reviewed the data and found that for years we've been denying assistance to survivors who couldn't prove ownership of their home. In many places in the U.S., homes are passed down from generation to generation, without formal paperwork.

This meant we were denying disaster assistance to those, in many cases, who needed it the most. So, we changed our policies. And in the last year, we've given more than \$325 million to 65,000 people who would otherwise not receive it.

For the public sector, after a disaster we provide large grants on a cost share basis for debris removal, emergency protective measures, and rebuilding



infrastructure. To give you a sense of the scale of this assistance, I'll refer to Hurricane Ida again. We've obligated more than \$474 million in funding to six states, and that amount will continue to grow as several of those large infrastructure projects are still underway. In total, we distributed more than \$47.8 million in recovery funds to individuals and the public sector in 2021.

This money reflects our investment in our nation's future, and it is essential we're investing in such a way that will buy down risk. One of my top priorities since becoming Administrator is improving the way we spend this recovery money to strengthen our nation's infrastructure and make our communities more resilient against all hazards.

To do this, we've increased our funding for hazard mitigation after disasters and put a new emphasis on using recovery dollars toward mitigation projects.

Opportunities to 'build back better' after a disaster are imperative, but too often we think about recovery as the "after" phase of the disaster, just focused on rebuilding and restoration. Instead, we need to think of the recovery phase as the "before" phase and integrate every element of the recovery process into our pre-disaster plans.

There is no better time to implement those necessary, long-term projects than after a disaster to create lasting change and a stronger future. And I can tell you, it works. You all probably remember the devastating, emotional images of Hurricane Michael making landfall as a Category 5 storm in October of 2018.

One of the hardest hit communities from that storm was Mexico Beach, Florida. I visited that community a few weeks ago and can tell you two things: first, if any of you arrived in that community today you would not be able to tell they were hit by a major hurricane a few years ago. Instead, you'll see a lively community, with lots of ongoing development, children in schools, families playing in yards, and friends eating together in restaurants.

Second, you'll see a community that has committed to adapting to climate change. They have adopted strong building codes – every building is being elevated 3 feet above the 500-year floodplain; they have relocated critical buildings away from the coastline; and they have incorporated mitigation into every rebuilding project they executed. Mexico Beach, Florida has said to climate disasters, not here, not ever



again.

Lasting change is impossible without lasting partnerships. Helping people means getting the right resources to the right people at the right time. And we can't do this alone.

But how can we build strong partnerships before the disaster that will carry over after? In many ways, we're siloed by the 'before, during and after' mentality; we work in different offices and may get paid by different funding streams. But we have to think more holistically. We, as crisis managers, must bridge that divide and bring people together.

We need more people sitting at the table when preparedness and mitigation are being discussed. We need more diversity – in demographics, experiences, expertise, and perspectives. We need response and recovery participating in long-term resilience and sustainability projects.

Because if there is one thing we know, and President Ford may have said it best, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

The partnerships we forge before, during, and after a disaster are often the best part of our profession. The longer I'm in crisis management, the more I find these relationships turn into friendships, and friendships into family, all of which are invaluable when facing those challenges that are unique to our line of work.

So, what makes our profession unique? Why do crisis managers make a difference? I believe the skills we bring are unlike any of our public safety counterparts.

First, we are in the business of risk, therefore we must embrace risk. Regardless of the problem we are given, we tap into our partnerships and lead the coordination to our desired outcome. We are also comfortable making decisions with incomplete information.

We don't allow 'perfect' to be the enemy of the good. We prioritize doing the right thing above doing the thing right. We weigh the risks, we lean forward, leverage every relationship we can, and get the job done.



Second, we understand the difference between routine and complex problems. We know that adding more people to complex problems isn't always the best solution. Instead, we activate, we coordinate, we innovate by bringing our emergency problem solvers and crisis managers to the table to get results.

And finally, we put people first. All our actions are focused on reducing suffering and building a more resilient nation.

There is a lot of noise in our profession. We're surrounded by the media and politicians and naysayers, but we know that nothing is more important than the people we serve. And serving them is our guiding light, if we put them first in everything we do, we will be successful every time.

This is a profession, but it's also a personal ethos of commitment, service and trusted partnerships.

I'm proud and humbled to be a part of this profession and our emergency management system, nationally and globally. If the last two years have taught us anything, it's that we are all in this together.

The partnerships we're forging in this room today are part of that system together, we're strengthening our nations by recognizing the interdependencies between us. And that's powerful.

We are united in our shared mission of helping people before, during and after disasters – and recognizing that the only way we can do that is by leveraging our shared resources, our shared knowledge and experiences, and our shared sense of purpose.

I'm honored to be a part of this group and look forward to working with you in the future.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak with you today.

