

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

OF

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BEFORE
THE

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“Hurricane Ida and Beyond: Readiness, Recovery, and Resilience”

Submitted
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Chair Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about our response and recovery efforts following Hurricane Ida, as well as the longer-term investments we must make to increase our nation's resilience in the face of climate change.

Climate change affects every single American. It is the biggest crisis facing our nation, and it is making natural disasters more frequent, more intense, and more destructive. Mitigating the effects of climate change is one of my top priorities for FEMA. Hurricane Ida has demonstrated the challenges presented by our changing climate, the benefits of mitigation investments, and the importance of equity in our response and recovery.

Fueled in part by warmer than normal waters in the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Ida's wind speeds intensified from 85 to 150 miles per hour in less than 24 hours. The Category 4 storm became the fifth strongest hurricane to ever make landfall in the mainland United States. Storms normally break apart quickly when they make landfall, but Ida remained a Category 4 storm for four hours. And Ida's impacts have affected states and communities from the Gulf of Mexico to the Northeast. Ida left a million people in Louisiana and Mississippi without power, at a time of sweltering heat. After transitioning and accelerating to a post-tropical cyclone, Ida caused widespread flooding in the northeastern United States, breaking multiple rainfall records, and causing catastrophic flash floods in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Hurricane Ida caused over one hundred direct fatalities, and my heart goes out to the families who lost loved ones.

For all its severe impacts, Hurricane Ida was also notable in other ways.

First, the storm came ashore 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina made landfall and caused widespread flooding in New Orleans and Coastal Mississippi -- but this time, the levees in New Orleans held, reflecting significant investments made in the aftermath of Katrina to strengthen the levee system.

Second, FEMA was well prepared for Ida. Thanks to Congressional action in the 16 years since Katrina, we have authorities that give us the ability to lean in much quicker than we have in the past to bring the full force of the federal family into position so we can respond quickly. We pre-positioned millions of liters of water, millions of meals, specialized response teams, and numerous resources from our

federal community, to deploy based on the immediate needs after the storm had passed. At FEMA, we say that disaster response is locally executed, state managed, and federally supported – and I am proud of how well we supported our state and local partners in responding to this storm. This was particularly true given the special challenges involved in responding to a disaster amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, as this storm hit the United States, FEMA was ready to implement important policy changes to help underserved communities, which are often disproportionately impacted by disasters, to obtain Individual Assistance to the full extent that they are eligible for it. Previously homeowners may have run into difficulties proving that they own their homes if their property was handed down informally through the years. To address this, we have expanded the forms of documentation that can prove ownership -- including documents like receipts for major repairs or improvements, court documents, public officials' letters, mobile home park letters, and applicant self-certification for mobile homes and travel trailers, as a last resort. In addition, FEMA has changed the way it calculates the threshold for property losses to qualify for Direct Housing (such as a trailer or mobile home), which ensures equitable damage evaluation regardless of the size of the damaged home.

The recovery phase for Hurricane Ida continues as we speak, and we will be dealing with the consequences of this hurricane for quite some time. But even as we do that work, we must make the kinds of generational-level mitigation investments necessary to reduce the impacts of the climate-fueled disasters that we will face in the months and years ahead.

Mitigation investments are incredibly worthwhile. An independent study by the National Institute of Building Sciences in 2019 found that every dollar in federal hazard mitigation grants invested in mitigation saves the American taxpayer an estimated six dollars in future spending.

At FEMA, a cornerstone of our mitigation efforts is the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program. I would like to thank Congress for providing the legislative tools to create BRIC, through the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018. By establishing a reliable stream of funding for larger mitigation projects through a nationwide grant program, the BRIC program

provides a critical opportunity for state, territorial, tribal and local governments to invest in a more resilient nation, reduce disaster suffering, and lessen future disaster costs. Earlier this year, President Biden visited FEMA to announce that he was increasing the funding available for the BRIC program to \$1 billion for the FY 2021 application period. These are the kinds of investments that will protect lives and property in the face of future storms.

Another important element of FEMA's mitigation efforts is the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). In August, President Biden approved more than \$3.46 billion for the HMGP program for the COVID-19 disaster declarations. As a result, every state, tribe, and territory that received a major disaster declaration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be eligible to receive substantial levels of funding to invest in mitigation projects that reduce risks from natural disasters. For eligible mitigation projects, HMGP funding can cover 75 percent of total project costs while states or communities cover the remaining share. We will be urging relevant agencies in your states to ensure that these funds are delivered to disadvantaged communities and would welcome your support in this effort.

One more critical piece is the FEMA Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) program, which helps provide financial and technical assistance to states and communities to reduce the risk of flood damage to homes and businesses through buyouts, elevation, and other activities. Flooding is the most common and costly natural disaster in the United States, and direct average annual flood losses have quadrupled from approximately \$4 billion per year in the 1980s to roughly \$17 billion per year between 2010 and 2018. The bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (H.R. 3684) approved by the Senate in August would provide \$3.5 billion over five years for the FMA program. The Biden Administration has urged the House to approve the bipartisan infrastructure bill without delay, and I would add my voice today in calling for its swift passage.

Mitigation is particularly important for underserved communities that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In administering our mitigation programs, we will keep equity considerations top of mind, and will include them in the competitive scoring process for programs such as FMA. Equity is one of my top priorities at FEMA, and the intersection of climate change and equity is a

particular concern for our agency, as the impacts are worse for vulnerable communities.

In closing, I want to thank all the first responders across our nation, our amazing FEMA workforce, and our interagency partners for their tireless work in responding to Hurricane Ida. They continue to answer the call to respond to disasters fueled by climate change, which truly is the crisis of our generation. The intensification of natural disasters will be our new normal. But this is a call to action, and I look forward to continuing to work with Congress to make our nation more resilient. I would be pleased to answer your questions.