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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement
Ranking Member Tammy Duckworth (IL-08)
Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets
Hearing on “Oversight of FEMA’s Response to the Baton Rouge Flood Disaster”
September 9, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Today’s hearing is an important opportunity to make sure that the federal government, and in particular FEMA, is doing everything it can to help the victims of the historic flood in Louisiana.

This hearing is also an opportunity to examine how FEMA’s response to natural disasters has evolved since Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and how much has improved since the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The torrential rains that hit Louisiana over the last few weeks have been described as a one-in-a-thousand-year event. Some areas received as much as two feet of water during the rains, with river levels rising to record highs, in some cases reaching six feet. The harm inflicted was vast, flooding more than 100,000 homes and forcing thousands of families to flee their homes.

FEMA deserves credit for being prepared to respond quickly to this massive natural disaster and I commend President Obama for expediting the major disaster declaration on the very same day Governor Edwards requested it.

While FEMA must continue working to improve its emergency preparedness and response efforts, it is important to recognize how far FEMA has come under the leadership of a true emergency management expert, Craig Fugate.

In the short space of weeks since the flooding, FEMA released over \$450 million to help individual flood victims, placed 2,717 families in hotels and motels, and deployed 333 manufactured housing units to the region.

As Governor Edwards noted, “from the very beginning of this event, FEMA has been by our side” and “...responsive to all of our requests.”

Of course, government is only one component of a comprehensive response. Americans from all walks of life have stepped forward to help the victims of flooding in Louisiana.

I know from personal experience that engaging with your community and helping others helps foster a sense of shared sacrifice and—at a time when our politics seem more focused on tearing us apart than bringing us together—that shared sacrifice will help us rekindle the national unity that has made us the strongest nation in the world.

During painful times of disaster and hardship is when we most need to come together in service to one another. I have been inspired by the hundreds of AmeriCorps members who deployed to the flooded areas in Louisiana to assist with recovery operations.

The leadership of these Americans who are devoting time to helping others is why I joined forces with Congressman John Lewis and my fellow combat Veteran, Seth Moulton, to introduce the 21st Century American Service Act—which seeks to ensure all young Americans have an opportunity to serve their country through civilian national service.

The efforts of FEMA Corps and AmeriCorps Disaster Response Teams to support shelter operations, home clean-up operations, survivor call centers, and disaster survivor assistance teams is a real world example of how national service can be a force for good in our communities and affect real change in American lives.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing today. I yield back.

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