

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 20, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

We write to seek information about what specific steps the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is taking to ensure that it is adequately prepared to respond to a natural disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. While these are unprecedented times and your Agency is working diligently to lead the Federal government response to the pandemic, we know that a natural disaster could strike at any moment. As the lead Federal agency responsible for emergency preparedness, response and recovery, it is imperative that your disaster preparation and recovery plans reflect the unique challenges presented by this ongoing pandemic response, so that the Federal government can provide adequate and timely assistance to any impacted State, local, tribal, or territorial government.

As the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases across the country has steadily increased since the President invoked the Stafford Act, spring flooding season is now upon us, wildfire season is fast approaching, tornado outbreaks are starting to spread, a major earthquake could strike at any moment, and hurricane season—which is projected to be above average—is just around the corner. Addressing major disasters like these requires a highly coordinated response across all levels of government that will be greatly complicated by the COVID-19 national emergency, including the social distancing measures public health officials are recommending. Further, the COVID-19 response has overwhelmed FEMA's already thin resources, raising concerns about the Agency's ability to handle both a nationwide public health crisis and the upcoming seasonal hazards that await.

The hurricane and wildfire seasons of 2017 and 2018—which saw an unprecedented volume of catastrophic disasters—and the declared events in the years since have greatly tested FEMA's all-hazards approach to disaster response. In Puerto Rico, we saw the devastating effects of a smaller scale public health crisis that resulted from an inadequate response to a natural disaster. In the Agency's own after-action report, FEMA acknowledged that it was unprepared for Irma and Maria in both supplies and personnel. The report found that chronic understaffing in the

Agency had put it in a position where they “placed staff in positions beyond their experiences and, in some instances, beyond their capabilities.”¹

Unfortunately, such issues remain while we are now facing the prospect of a simultaneous major natural disaster compounding the current public health emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns are not just limited to inadequate staffing levels, sheltering procedures in a time of social distancing, a global shortage of necessary protective gear. It is critical that FEMA share with Congress the steps it is taking to ensure that the Agency is fully prepared to carry out its mission in responding to natural disasters during this pandemic.

Therefore, we respectfully request answers to the following questions:

1. If a natural disaster were to hit today, how many of FEMA’s specialized staff—those fully qualified to work in operations, safety, and planning—would be immediately available to deploy?
2. With the Agency’s own Daily Operations Brief consistently reporting single digit availability of FEMA’s field leadership contingent—Federal Coordinating Officers, who are trained and certified to manage disasters around the country—available to be deployed, what is the Agency’s plan to grow the ranks of this cadre and how long will it take to train new field leaders?²
3. How soon does FEMA anticipate needing to utilize the Surge Capacity Force and/or increase the number of contractors, and what is the current strategy for doing so?
4. FEMA’s two main training facilities – the Emergency Management Institute and the Center for Domestic Preparedness -- have been closed since March 14 and are not scheduled to open until at least May 10. What is the Agency’s plan for training both Federal staff and its State, local, tribal, and territorial partners?
5. What are the specific strategies FEMA is using to coordinate with Federal, state, and local agencies in order to share information and prepare for the unique challenges these upcoming and overlapping disaster seasons will bring?
6. How have those strategies changed to account for the unique challenges facing stakeholders such as limited training, conferences, and briefings that normally provide opportunities for sharing information and best practices?
7. How is FEMA preparing for the possibility that a significant number of its own personnel may be ill or in self-isolation when faced with short- or no-notice natural disaster response and recovery?
8. With FEMA relying on federal firefighters from the USFS, BLM, and other agencies to provide qualified incident management expertise for the COVID-19 response, what coordination has been undertaken with their home agencies to ensure that such personnel are ready for their primary mission come wildfire season and to reduce their risk of COVID-19 infection during their service under the FEMA-led pandemic response?

¹ <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1531743865541-d16794d43d3082544435e1471da07880/2017FEMAHurricaneAAR.pdf>

² https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/USDHSFEMA/2020/04/14/file_attachments/1426564/FEMA%20Daily%20Ops%20Briefing%2004-14-2020.pdf

9. How will FEMA ensure its Reservist cadre—which includes personnel who have underlying health conditions or may be older in age—are not penalized for opting out of a potentially hazardous deployment?
10. With supply shortages of basic personal protective equipment (PPE) well-known, what is FEMA’s plan for providing PPE and other critical equipment to its staff and volunteers in order to ensure their health and safety during upcoming response operations?
11. What is FEMA’s plan for coordinating with an already over-burdened health care system in the event that thousands of potential disaster survivors require medical assistance?
12. What is FEMA’s alternate plan to address the need for mass sheltering and evacuation facilities when public health officials have advised for social distancing and against large gatherings?
13. Is FEMA considering using its authority to activate Transitional Sheltering Assistance to utilize hotels and other non-congregate sheltering options in the immediate wake of a disaster rather than long-planned congregate shelters?
14. What is FEMA’s plan to address the potential need for first responder base camps, which can often be crowded and make it difficult to follow social distancing guidelines?
15. What efforts are being made by FEMA to coordinate directly with state and local entities to ensure that individuals in need of temporary housing as a result of a natural disaster have access to the food supplies they need, such as ensuring adequate numbers of volunteers to assist in food preparation and distribution or developing a program to reimburse states if they hire caterers and service industry workers should other voluntary organizations or aid not be available?
16. What is FEMA doing to coordinate with the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD) to prepare for the real possibility of not being able to readily deploy the traditional volunteer force?
17. What is FEMA’s plan for managing already stretched thin personnel across potentially multiple simultaneous natural disasters during the pandemic response, and what challenges does FEMA foresee in carrying out response efforts under these circumstances?
18. Is FEMA considering halting permanent work on still-open past disasters and other ongoing projects in order to allocate additional resources and personnel for its pandemic response? If so, please specify the projects that would be impacted.
19. Is FEMA considering proactively activating Public and Individual Assistance given the challenges states will face gathering Preliminary Damage Assessments?
20. Is FEMA planning to provide states, tribes, and territories with any additional resources for natural disaster response, given that their emergency response capacity is being consumed by the COVID-19 pandemic?
21. Does FEMA have a plan to expand the National Response Coordination Center at FEMA Headquarters or set up an expanded site in the event additional large-scale interagency activations are needed over the next few months?
22. In the case that FEMA has to respond to natural disasters during this pandemic, how will that affect the resources it is currently dedicating to the Coronavirus Task Force operations and other COVID-related efforts?

Thank you for your attention to these matters. Given the urgency of this situation, we ask that you respond within two weeks from the date of this letter to Mike Stoever in Representative McNerney's office (Mike.Stoever@mail.house.gov) and Isaac Irby in Senator Harris' office (Isaac_Irby@harris.senate.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jerry McNerney".

JERRY MCNERNEY
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kamala D. Harris".

KAMALA D. HARRIS
United States Senator

Also signed by:

/s/
PETER DEFAZIO
Member of Congress

/s/
GARY C. PETERS
United States Senator

/s/
DINA TITUS
Member of Congress

/s/
EDWARD J. MARKEY
United States Senator

/s/
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator

/s/
CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO
United States Senator

/s/
RON WYDEN
United States Senator

/s/
CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senator

/s/
JACK REED
United States Senator

/s/
JEFFREY A. MERKLEY
United States Senator

/s/
BOB CASEY
United States Senator

/s/
TAMMY DUCKWORTH
United States Senator

/s/
TINA SMITH
United States Senator

/s/
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE
United States Senator

/s/
BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator

/s/
MAZIE K. HIRONO
United States Senator

/s/
KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND
United States Senator

/s/
ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senator

/s/
BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator

/s/
CORY A. BOOKER
United States Senator

/s/
JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senator

/s/
PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator

/s/
AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senator

/s/
ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
Member of Congress

/s/
ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ
Member of Congress

/s/
NYDIA M. VELÁZQUEZ
Member of Congress

/s/
CINDY AXNE
Member of Congress

/s/
GRACE F. NAPOLITANO
Member of Congress

/s/
ALCEE L. HASTINGS
Member of Congress

/s/
LIZZIE FLETCHER
Member of Congress

/s/
DARREN SOTO
Member of Congress

/s/
SHEILA JACKSON LEE
Member of Congress

/s/
SALUD O. CARBAJAL
Member of Congress

/s/
SUZANNE BONAMICI
Member of Congress

/s/
TULSI GABBARD
Member of Congress

/s/
NANETTE DIAZ BARRAGÁN
Member of Congress

/s/
DEBBIE DINGELL
Member of Congress

/s/
PRAMILA JAYAPAL
Member of Congress

/s/
TONY CÁRDENAS
Member of Congress

/s/
SCOTT H. PETERS
Member of Congress

/s/
RAUL RUIZ, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/
MARK POCAN
Member of Congress

/s/
BILL FOSTER
Member of Congress

/s/
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ
Member of Congress

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JOE NEGUSE
Member of Congress

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JULIA BROWNLEY
Member of Congress

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KATHY CASTOR
Member of Congress

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MATT CARTWRIGHT
Member of Congress

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MIKE THOMPSON
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ED CASE
Member of Congress

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JAMES P. MCGOVERN
Member of Congress

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CHARLIE CRIST
Member of Congress

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JAN SCHAKOWSKY
Member of Congress

/s/
ABBY FINKENAUER
Member of Congress

/s/
DAVE LOEBSACK
Member of Congress

/s/
STEPHANIE MURPHY
Member of Congress

/s/
LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD
Member of Congress

/s/
JESÚS G. "CHUY" GARCÍA
Member of Congress

/s/
JUAN VARGAS
Member of Congress

/s/
RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Member of Congress

/s/
RASHIDA TLAIB
Member of Congress

/s/
JARED HUFFMAN
Member of Congress

/s/
DEBBIE MUCARSEL-POWELL
Member of Congress

/s/
BETTY MCCOLLUM
Member of Congress

/s/
KATIE PORTER
Member of Congress

/s/
J. LUIS CORREA
Member of Congress

/s/
ZOE LOFGREN
Member of Congress

/s/
GWEN S. MOORE
Member of Congress

/s/
EMMANUEL CLEAVER, II
Member of Congress

/s/
YVETTE D. CLARKE
Member of Congress

/s/
RO KHANNA
Member of Congress

/s/
DONNA E. SHALALA
Member of Congress

/s/
SANFORD D. BISHOP JR.
Member of Congress

/s/
CEDRIC L. RICHMOND
Member of Congress

/s/
MIKE DOYLE
Member of Congress

/s/
JUDY CHU
Member of Congress

/s/
DAVID CICILLINE
Member of Congress

/s/
DORIS MATSUI
Member of Congress

/s/
HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON, JR.
Member of Congress

/s/
ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Member of Congress