

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell Delivers Speech at National Hurricane Conference

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WASHINGTON -- Today, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell delivered a speech on hurricane and disaster preparedness at the National Hurricane Conference in New Orleans. Other speakers were Ken Graham, Director, National Hurricane Center, Miami; James Waskom, Director, Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, Baton Rouge, La.; and Kevin Guthrie, Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management, Tallahassee, Fla.

Below is the administrator's speech as prepared for delivery.

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here – in person – with all of you today.

I am so proud of this community because you embody the resilience this nation demonstrated during the last 18 months. We all know how difficult the last year and a half has been for everyone as we carried out our “normal” responsibilities AND simultaneously navigated the pandemic.

All of us have personal stories of how this pandemic affected our families, our friends, and our communities.

However, I have also seen this pandemic bring out the best in our communities; people adapting to new technologies to stay in contact with one another, and helping their family, friends, and neighbors through a situation none of us could have envisioned a year ago.

That spirit of community, of partnership, and caring for each other are going to be critical as we enter what is slated to be an extremely active hurricane season. It's critical that the entire emergency management family – federal, state, tribal, local, and territorial - take the lessons we have learned and the innovative ways of delivering our mission during COVID and apply them moving forward.



This professional community of emergency managers is more than just people who help our neighbors during disasters. For many of us here today, our involvement in emergency services goes beyond the title. It represents a calling.

This dedication to our shared calling is an attribute our communities will continue to count on when they need support.

During my Senate confirmation hearing, I shared a goal to elevate and professionalize the field of emergency management by better defining what it means to be an emergency manager and building career paths for the nation's emergency management workforce.

As a firefighter in Colorado, the Commissioner of emergency management in New York City, a member of the Air National Guard, and through my previous work at FEMA, I recognize the diverse skill set necessary to be successful in our profession.

We are perpetual students of our craft, continually learning to be ready for and adapting to new missions. We demonstrate the value of teamwork, critical thinking, and creative problem solving. We are civic leaders who remember our past while planning for the future.

Emergency managers and first responders are the foundations of the communities we serve because we value the people in them. During disasters, the people who are impacted are not just survivors; they are our colleagues, our friends, our neighbors, and our families.

While we think through how to better serve our communities, we must also acknowledge where we have opportunities to improve.

We are at a pivotal point where we, as the emergency management community, have the opportunity to address two key priorities: climate change and equity.

In 2020, our nation not only endured one of the most active hurricane seasons in its history – but called on us to perform our duties amid a global pandemic.

We are now getting accustomed to a ‘new normal’ while the world continues to change before our eyes. Many of these challenges are exacerbated because of climate change. Weather patterns are telling us that the 2021 hurricane and



wildfire seasons could be busy again. Now is the time to have honest and real conversations about what we can do together to achieve a more resilient and prepared nation.

As FEMA Administrator, I am committed to furthering FEMA's role in addressing the effects of changing climate.

To accelerate this process, our resilience and mitigation efforts must be focused at the community and household level. With that in mind, I am excited to highlight two of our newest initiatives for building community resilience through hazard mitigation.

First, I'm pleased to announce a new mitigation funding program to help homeowners. Under the Individuals and Households Program (IHP), homeowners in areas covered by Presidential Disaster Declarations may now repair their homes in ways that will reduce the likelihood of future disaster damage.

These measures – which include enhanced roof repairs and elevating or relocating water heaters, furnaces and electrical panels -- will allow homeowners to recover and make their homes more resilient to severe weather events, reducing disaster suffering and the likelihood future federal assistance will be needed.

Second, I am also excited that President Biden announced \$1 billion in support of our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program for pre-disaster hazard mitigation projects. This is double the amount of funding provided last year and a portion of these funds are targeted to historically underserved communities.

- I'm thrilled the BRIC program will begin to shift the federal focus from reactive disaster mitigation spending towards a proactive investment in system-wide community mitigation so when the next hurricane, flood, or wildfire comes, communities can better withstand the impacts.

We must also build a culture that understands resilience is a critical part of our day-to-day lives. Together, we can make this a reality by focusing on continuous improvement while striving toward local and national mitigation and preparedness goals.



For example, flooding is the most common and costly type of disaster in the United States. In fact, flooding and coastal storms account for roughly 70 percent of all Presidential Disaster Declarations over the past decade. Where it rains, it floods.

Knowing the true flood risk of a property is critical for homeowners to secure adequate insurance coverage, FEMA has made several improvements to transform the National Flood Insurance Program by reducing complexity and increasing transparency. These changes include a new pricing methodology for a more equitable program called Risk Rating 2.0 - Equity in Action.

The current rating methodology, while actuarially sound, has not changed since the 1970s. Since then, technology has evolved and so has FEMA's understanding of flood risk.

Risk Rating 2.0 allows FEMA to provide individuals and communities with information to make more informed decisions on purchasing flood insurance and taking mitigation actions that may help lower rates. This may include elevating a structure on piles, installing flood openings, or moving machinery and equipment such as HVAC units above the first floor.

Risk Rating 2.0 will allow FEMA to distribute premiums more equitably across all policyholders based on the replacement cost value and individual property's flood risk.

It is impossible to do the work that FEMA does without our partners – federal agencies; the state, local, tribal and territorial partners; and others in the nonprofit and private sectors.

From the smallest rural volunteer fire department to emergency management agencies in our nation's urban centers, this system of support strengthens our preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.

You know your communities best because these are places you call home.

Our ability to partner across the emergency management system helps us do our jobs better and makes our response more effective.



However, we must also admit where we have more work to do. We cannot be shy about asking the equity question. It is a fact that disasters exacerbate pre-existing inequities that already existed before these events occur.

The question we have to ask ourselves is what we can do to provide all survivors, not just those who have the means, access to assistance.

Sometimes this inequity happens because certain communities don't receive as much post-disaster aid. Sometimes it's because these groups are in areas that are more susceptible to the impacts of climate change. Sometimes these groups have limited access to recovery programs or resources to help them get the assistance they seek.

In order to start addressing these systemic barriers, we are asking for your help. Through the end of July, we have a Request for Information on the FEMA dot gov webpage aimed at collecting your ideas for how to tackle this issue.

We also have to acknowledge our own limitations in this effort. FEMA's assistance is not designed to solve societal inequities; however, we have an obligation as both stewards of taxpayer dollars, and to our mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters, of making sure that we focus on our historically disadvantaged and underserved communities.

A truly resilient nation can only exist when all communities reap the benefits of the help our emergency management system can provide.

For me, equity is not only about what we do for others, it's also about the workforce I lead each and every day.

As we execute on our mission, we must also ensure equity across all FEMA operations. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not optional for us, they must be a core component of how we conduct ourselves.

One of the greatest FEMA strengths is our diverse workforce. We understand that to help individuals, we need to create an environment that is welcoming and takes our values beyond abstract concepts.

Just as diversity in our communities strengthens the fabric of our country, diversity in our workforce strengthens our agency. And as we want to hear from the nation



through the RFI, we also want to make sure every FEMA employee has a voice and an opportunity to be heard.

We do this through a robust set of Federal Employee Resource Groups which allow staff from across the agency to take part in meaningful discussions and hear about the varied experiences and cultures we have at FEMA. For example:

- With our LGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Group, I was pleased to be able to take part in this first ever ceremony to display the rainbow flag in FEMA's National Response Coordination Center to mark the start of Pride Month.
- Our African American Employee Resource Group hosted listening sessions and discussions on the tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent civil rights demonstrations. On Monday, the agency held a virtual Juneteenth event to help celebrate this important anniversary and African American heritage.
- These resource groups are not only for celebration purposes. In fact, following the tragic shooting and murder of Asian women in Georgia, our Asian American Employee Resource Group hosted listening sessions and discussions, which gave our staff a safe space to discuss their feelings and get support.

Equity is not just a lens for us internally at FEMA; we hope that you will embrace this challenge in your communities as well.

Another key priority is readiness. We know that preparedness is the cornerstone for a resilient community.

And within our communities, it's also important to remember that preparedness starts at the individual level.

As everyone in this room is aware, there are simple guidelines all of us should follow to ensure our safety and the safety of our family, friends, and neighbors. But even though these actions are simple, they are worth repeating:

First, get vaccinated: The more people who are vaccinated, the more it will help us face the challenge of another hurricane season with pandemic conditions.

Second, make a plan: We need your help to make preparedness an important part of the conversation. Use your influence to elevate messages that help people learn how to prepare for disasters that might happen where you live, work, or visit.



Every one of us has a responsibility to prepare for disasters that are likely in our communities. No one knows this better than the Gulf Coast region.

Preparing for disasters can take some time to complete. The most important part of this step is that people start the planning process now, well before disasters strike.

Third, stay informed: We live in the most connected time in the history of our nation. We also know that timely and accurate information is critical to promoting the safety of our communities and we must use every tool at our disposal to get information to our communities to help protect them from harm.

- During COVID-19, FEMA made great strides in promoting accessibility - we provided phone interpretation services in more than 180 languages for non-English speakers who visited vaccination centers.
- While this is just a start, it will help promote our final safety guideline of:

Heeding evacuation warnings from local officials: If you have your community following the first three steps, this one follows naturally. ... When told to evacuate – evacuate.

As emergency managers, it's up to us to set the example in our communities. Help amplify the message and encourage those who may be hesitant to follow state/local evacuation orders.

Encourage individual preparedness at the local level and share your evacuation plans and other preparedness steps with family, friends, and neighbors and help them craft their own.

While everyone may not be able to keep a tank filled with gas or create “go bags” with emergency supplies it is possible to do some things little by little over time to increase preparedness every day.

The challenges some individuals have with preparedness may stem from how our messages are reaching their communities – if the messages are reaching them at all.

We deployed 18 mobile vaccination units to help reach traditionally underserved and more remote communities. We want to get the message – and help – to those



that need it the most.

We also know that there will be times when a “one size fits all” approach doesn’t apply. One of the lessons we learned is that sometimes we need to make an extra effort to meet people where they are.

By working collaboratively with our state and local partners, we are proud to say that almost 58 percent of the vaccines in federal pilot CVCs were delivered to historically underserved populations.

And because we are still operating in a pandemic environment, we all need to be prepared to continue to protect public health during disaster response and recovery operations.

FEMA recently rereleased the Pandemic Operational Guidance based on your feedback in order to provide emergency managers with actionable guidance, resources, and lessons learned to prepare for response and recovery operations amidst COVID-19.

We will continue to adapt our operations and program delivery to expedite services, support, and assistance to your communities while protecting the health and safety of disaster survivors and our workforce.

In closing, COVID-19 challenged the ways emergency managers across the country needed to think, react, and execute. The unprecedented scale of the pandemic produced challenges that we collectively innovated, collaborated, and managed ourselves through.

These lessons must not be forgotten, and we owe it to ourselves and the nation to internalize them in both theory and practice as we strive to build a more holistic emergency management system. Our collective mission is too important not to.

As we continue to persevere, we take solace in coming away from this experience smarter, stronger and more resilient than ever. Our work as emergency managers is the epitome of courage and a shining example of what it means to serve our nation every single day.

Just as you have demonstrated bravery in your work. I challenge everyone here today to be brave in our efforts to address climate change, to embrace diversity,



equity and inclusion, and to continue delivering our missions with dignity and respect.

Thank you.



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