FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to the Network of Directors-General of the European Crisis Center

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Good afternoon and thank you all for allowing me to join this session.

As I mentioned this morning, we're all in this together and successful crisis management is dependent on the partnerships we build. For this session, I'd like to use my time to talk specifically about supply chains and the value of those partnerships in creating resilience.

But we can't talk about supply chains without talking about COVID. Two years ago, we faced so much uncertainty. Each one of us in this room had a crash course not only in public health, but also the medical industry and its supply chain. It's very fragile supply chain.

COVID was all about managing shortages – you remember the early days when we were all in the business of finding PPE, ventilators, and hospital beds. We had to learn quickly, and we had to improvise.

At the time, I was serving as the New York City Commissioner of Emergency Management and – I'm sure you have similar stories – we were using every creative solution we could to manage those shortages, to get our frontline healthcare workers and the patients they were trying to treat the supplies they needed.

For a brief time, when medical gowns weren't available, we ordered tens of thousands of rain ponchos. When we couldn't purchase face masks or face shields, we retooled local factories and made them ourselves. Us all being 'in it together' meant we were all competing for the same resources. Necessity drove innovation and there wasn't a problem in front of us that didn't require a do-it-yourself solution.

We were learning and adapting as we went along. And the steepest learning curve was the medical supply chain. There was so much we didn't know! We had phone call after phone call from people who said they knew someone who could get us what we needed.

We became so inundated with these offers and leads that we created a team to manage them. It was the "Got A Guy Team." As in, "I've got a guy in China who can get us masks." We had to designate people on our team to just handle these leads and see what was viable. It was overwhelming in every way.

We knew we were a part of a global supply chain, but it wasn't clear where we fit, what all the pieces were, or how our actions fit within the overall system. Our reliance on the just-in-time delivery model for everything from medical supplies to everyday consumer goods proved problematic for our response but also for the psyche of the nation in those early days.

And, when I came to FEMA in April of last year, we were – of course – still in the middle of the COVID fight. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, FEMA has led the nation's COVID response. This was the first time in U.S. history every state, territory, and the District of Columbia has been under a major disaster declaration at the time same time.

Our FEMA workforce, along with our partners, have worked tirelessly to deploy personnel, set up community vaccination centers, allocate and ship equipment from all over the world, and work closely with industry to navigate the supply chain.

While COVID was extraordinarily disruptive to every facet of our lives, we knew it would not disrupt hurricanes, or wildfires, or other disasters that we regularly respond to. So, as we made decisions on the COVID-19 supply chain, we also had to evaluate those decisions in the context of the non-COVID-19 supply chains to ensure they were not destabilized. We needed to make sure we didn't make the situation worse by disrupting the grocery sector, food production, and the freight market – all of which we rely on when responding to disasters like hurricanes.

For FEMA, we needed a complete re-evaluation our programs to look specifically at how we can adapt and adjust to disruptions within the supply chain, not just for COVID but for other hazards, too.

So, we conducted focused studies on regional supply chain ecosystems and incorporated this knowledge into FEMA regional catastrophic planning. We found we needed a system-level understanding of private sector supply chains across all elements of FEMA and the nation, with a better appreciation for global impacts.

But most importantly, we also found that relationships with the private sector and other non-traditional partnering organizations are critical for national resilience. We needed a stronger relationship with industry to make the more efficient and effective decisions.

Throughout COVID, we were able to adapt and push forward, but again, it's those relationships and enduring partnerships that matter most in a crisis. If we want to build a crisis management system that's truly resilient, that can withstand any type of shock or disruption, we must have those partnerships established beforehand.

The importance of private sector collaboration became even more apparent once we began planning for the possibility of cyber attacks in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

FEMA and our Homeland Security colleagues are partnering in a much more robust way with private industry to strengthen critical infrastructure sectors like energy, water and transportation.

The lessons learned from supply chain disruptions during COVID are directly influencing our planning and readiness for cyberattacks. While the threats are seemingly different, the potential impacts are very much the same.

These sectors are deeply inter-connected, with each other and as a part of the global supply chain. It is imperative that we understand these connections and how any decisions we make, or disruptions caused by bad actors could have cascading impacts, 2nd, 3rd and 4th order effects that will amplify the impacts.

The lessons we learned during COVID re-energized our efforts to build resilience through partnerships, especially with those organizations that are traditionally outside our field.

In practice, building partnerships means strengthening national resilience through system integration.

We integrate our systems in many ways with our local and state partners, but also with the military. The Department of Defense must be familiar with our national response systems, our computer applications and our policy frameworks, as well as our people and our culture.

So, we exercise with the military and train with the military. We have military staff assigned to sit with us during steady-state, so they're familiar with our systems, and we're familiar with theirs.

This type of collaboration has been effective time and again during disasters and other crises.

We know who to call if we need to coordinate response operations and we know where to go when there are questions. The Department of Defense has been with us, side-by-side, throughout COVID and every other disaster we've faced in the last 15 years.

Our successful partnership with our military and others that helps our nation recover from disasters, but it takes time, money, and personnel to make it happen. Most of all, it takes sustained energy and prioritization from leadership. Partnership building is never a "one and done" situation. It's an investment that pays dividends over time.

These partnerships pay-off during a crisis. In New York City we had a close working relationship with one of our sister agencies, the Department of Design and Construction. The Department of Design and Construction is responsible for managing major capital improvement projects around the city, from building and restoring bridges to government buildings to water and sewer mains. But, during COVID, we used their proven expertise to design and build field hospitals, to design and build testing sites, and to design and build vaccination sites. Architects and engineers became emergency managers, just like you and me, and brought their unique expertise and skillset to the COVID-19 battle.

Regardless of the type of threat we face, we must understand the complexity of the global supply chain and the underlying technological systems that connect us. We all rely on each other in ways we still do not fully appreciate, linked through global systems that govern our lives.

But we’re partners around this table with shared experiences and common goals, and a profession that unites us. Working through complexity is what we do best and building relationships is how we get things done.

COVID-19, Ukraine, cyber threats and other crises are stressing our national systems and personnel, but we’re prepared and committed to protecting our Nation and collaborating with our Allies.

Thank you.