FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to HERricane Los Angeles

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It is great to be with you today.

I would like to offer my special thanks to the Institute for Diversity in Emergency Management and the Los Angeles Department of Emergency Management for inviting me to speak today.

I have to say, it is a great feeling – a powerful feeling – to be in a room full of our nation's future women leaders!

The HERricane program is an incredibly important opportunity to help young women like you to grow and flourish into a career in emergency management – what I believe is the best job out there.

I truly wish this program was around when I was your age. I would have been the first to sign up!

Now – while we are at a HERricane conference, the natural hazards here in southern California are bit different.

Earthquakes, for example, are what California in known for.

Some of you may have participated in earthquake drills at school where you practice quickly taking cover under your desk.

And wildfires – some of which have turned the sky orange and blanketed L.A. and Orange counties with ash, are becoming more frequent with extreme heat on the rise and a worsening drought.

But the common denominator across all hazards, is disruption.

Disasters disrupt our everyday lives and the communities in which we live.

They disrupt natural landscapes that for hundreds of years escaped the unforgiving impacts of extreme weather.

And sometimes, they disrupt the course of history.

Now, what if I told you that each of you are disruptors?

That's right. Each of you are disrupting the field of emergency management in the best way possible.

You are balancing the scales and bringing depth to what diversity in emergency management means.

You are bringing fresh and progressive perspectives to our field that is being forced to rapidly adapt to a growing threat landscape.

You are signing up to bring coordination to chaos.

However, I know from personal experience, that choosing to embark on this career path takes courage and the determination.

Now, I am proud to say we are seeing more women step into leadership positions in emergency management than ever before**.**

For instance, six of my top leaders at FEMA are women – the most diverse leadership team in the agency's history.

And 51% percent of FEMA's workforce is represented by women.

This is progress – but it did not come easy.

The women I know rose through the ranks by being relentless in their pursuit of success, and were confident that their talent, experience, and their perspectives deserved a seat at the head of the table.

I believe it comes down to taking personal risk – a key ingredient to success.

I want you to think for a moment about when you took personal risk.

Did you sign up for advanced courses in high school to get ahead for college?

Did you perhaps relocate to a brand-new place to pursue an education?

Or take a job on gut instinct when those you trusted said it was not a good idea?

Now, I want you to think about what came after.

Did you thrive in that new environment? Did doors start flying open? Did you discover a new passion?

I see some nodding heads, so I will take that as a yes.

I took personal risk a few times. And each time it felt like the scariest thing I had ever done.

Before I became the FEMA Administrator, I served as Commissioner for New York City Emergency Management.

But, with hundreds of career paths, why choose emergency management?

Because I will tell you, up until recently most people could not tell you what an emergency manager did.

People know firefighters, they know cops, they know nurses. But why not emergency managers?

Perhaps, because unlike other emergency responders, we are a relatively new profession.

FEMA, for example, is only 45 years old.

But we have made progress!

Universities are now offering degree programs in emergency management.

Students right out of high school and college are signing up to join FEMA Corps.

And then we have efforts just like the HERricane program that help grow a minority demographic within our profession that has been historically underrepresented.

The bottom line is, we must continue to act with intent to make sure our profession reflects the communities we serve.

Like I said, this is progress.

Most of us agree that the last few years proved emergency management is not an easy job.

Catastrophic weather events, pandemics, domestic terrorism, mass migration to our borders, and cyberattacks are no longer uncommon events, these are challenges we face every day; this is our new normal.

So, what makes our jobs as emergency managers so important?

First, we have the great responsibility of staying not two, but ten steps ahead of threats we simply cannot predict.

Second, emergency managers are entrusted to protect the homeland, our communities, our neighbors, and our loved ones, from all hazards, at all times.

And third, one of our most important jobs is to maintain and strengthen the public's confidence in our government – in each of us – to be forward looking, informed, and always ready to go on America's worst day.

This reality can weigh heavy on our shoulders. Some days we may question whether we are simply up for the job.

But I will tell you right now, each of you are here for a reason.

You are here because you know you can do this – because you have heard, and chosen, to answer the call to public service.

So, now what? What are you going to do with all the knowledge you have gained this week?

Take what you learned this week and share it far and wide among your family, friends, and neighbors.

By doing this, you are helping inspire a culture of personal preparedness within your own communities.

Reflect on things that sparked your interest and explore how you can integrate it into your career path.

By doing this, you are envisioning a goal and a fulfilling future, you can work toward.

Keep in touch with the new friends you made this week and support one another as you progress through your career journey.

By doing this, you are building a network of strong and supportive women who will celebrate your good days, and help you through your bad ones, too.

Finally, remember that you are the future generation that we are counting on to make this country a place in which your children and grandchildren, will thrive in.

As former First Lady Michelle Obama said, “You may live in the world as it is, but you can still work to create the world as it should be.”

Thank you.