FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks at the NEMA Midyear Meeting 2023

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Hello, it is great to be with you.

I would like to thank Patrick and NEMA for the invitation to speak with you today.

Patrick, it has been so great to see you take on this leadership role for NEMA. I valued your candidness when sharing your members' issues during our time together in Tennessee, and I encourage you to continue this compassionate advocacy for the profession.

Yet again we see communities that have experienced devastating impacts.

Hundreds of homes destroyed. Businesses that may never recover. A debris field that can be seen for miles.

But just as I have seen across the country, I see the best in people.

Volunteers from Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, and all across the country, there to help those in need.

I heard amazing acts of heroism from community members crawling from the rubble to quickly rush and help their neighbors.

And I talked with local first responders, and health care professionals who quickly stood up a makeshift clinic in the armory to help those who were injured.

All of you in this room are managing more events like this. Events that as the initial incident is getting stabilized – are already planning for recovery.

Complex recoveries like I saw in Rolling Fork, Mississippi yesterday.

Which is why today, I would like to talk about recovery, specifically long-term recovery, and I want to lay the foundation of our conversation by stepping into the shoes of a survivor, who we will call “Mary”.

A storm is coming, and Mary begins to worry. She has three small children and is a caretaker for her disabled mother.

The local news outlets are reporting people in her area have been asked by authorities to evacuate. She looks down at her cellphone as emergency alerts begin to come in. She asks her neighbors what they plan to do, some are leaving, and some decide to stay. She checks social media to see what people are saying. She is quickly becoming overwhelmed.

Her mother urges for them to leave so she quickly begins packing the family’s bags. Clothes, food, medicine, she wonders what she could be missing.

A friend texts her the address of a local emergency shelter but her mother is in a wheelchair. She worries whether they will be able to get her in the building, what if there are lots of stairs?

After a few hours, they find an accessible shelter and begin to settle in. Emergency alerts are still pinging her phone, the storm is quickly rolling in.

Mary wonders what will happen to her house, to her neighbors, to their life back home. She hopes for the best but she braces herself for the worst.

Mary’s greatest fears become real when they are finally allowed to return home. The house is flooded, the old oak tree lays across the front yard, she can see the sky through holes in her roof and her family’s belongings are long gone.

Mary is in shock and does not know what to do. So, she turns to FEMA for help as that is what she heard people usually do. She fills out applications for assistance and hopes that she did it right. She looks around her home and says, “I think we can stay here for the night.”

We all have a general idea of how the rest of Mary’s story would go. She, perhaps like most of her community, would be dependent on government assistance in the weeks, and months, and years ahead.

We can expect that there would be a need for housing, that unemployment numbers would rise, and the local economy would struggle to rebound.

But how we planned for the long-term recovery in Mary's community would need to be driven by their unique needs.

Because no two definitions of long-term recovery should be the same.

Our disasters, challenges, and needs are all different.

Our climates, economies, and people, they are all different.

So, how can we come together to strengthen one of the most complex parts of the disaster cycle, when no two roads to recovery are the same?

We can start by focusing on the one thing that we all share, our passion for helping people.

In the two decades since 9/11 we, as a profession and as a nation, have built tremendous capability and capacity for response.

From specialized training, to equipment, to technology, to networks of systems, relationships, and laws that allow us to move resources nationwide we are really good at response.

Just look at the thousands of emergency managers who led their communities through COVID-19. Many of our systems bent, but they did not break and that's because of you kept them reinforced.

However, we still have more work ahead of us to better address what happens in the months and years after disaster strikes.

Over the last two years, I have seen the increase in disasters prompt important discussions about key gaps in long-term recovery.

I have heard emergency managers express the need for the larger federal family to stay on the ground further into the long-term recovery.

I have heard you say our policies and programs are hard to navigate, take too long, are too rigid, and leave a very real gap between the people who need our

help and the systems in place to help them.

I have heard you express that regardless of the size and scope of the disaster, the size of your team does not change.

As the disasters become more frequent, as the needs become more complex, and as the expectations continue to rise, the call to act will keep getting louder.

So, where do we go from here?

Perhaps, we start by looking at the systems in place, identify what works, and make the right investments to enable those systems to grow.

By operationalizing our Recovery Support Functions, for example, we can do for recovery what our Emergency Support Functions do for response.

But we need to enable them, we need to activate them sooner, and we need them to stay engaged longer.

During Hurricane Ian, for example, we issued RSF Mission Assignments within the first week.

HUD, HHS, the Army Corps, USDA, EDA, and DOI were quickly called in to provide key expertise and technical assistance on economic recovery, health and social services, infrastructure systems, and natural and cultural resources.

The early deployment of RSFs allowed those federal teams more time to build critical relationships with SLTTs to support the transition to long-term recovery.

And with time serving as our most precious commodity, this will be a critical proactive strategy to shorten this part of the disaster cycle.

This is something that Montana's Emergency Management Director Delila Bruno knows well as she is helping inspire an industry shift from "prepare to respond" to "prepare to recover."

It is this kind of thinking that can break the "respond, recover, rinse and repeat" cycle.

And, it is this kind of thinking that can inspire a paradigm shift in how we recover from disasters, how we evaluate our programs across government, and how we resource our agencies.

At FEMA, we are focused on doing our part to help inspire this kind of shift, as well.

We recognize that establishing relationships with our partners on the back end of an event is simply too late. And with the few blue-sky days we have on our side, we have a limited window of opportunity to strengthen the connective tissue that holds us together post-disaster.

To that end, we are reinforcing our recovery planning capabilities by adding two permanent, steady-state recovery coordination positions in every FEMA region.

These individuals will proactively support the development of disaster recovery capabilities, as well as build and enhance relationships with our federal partners at the regional level who play a critical role in recovery.

We are also adding several positions at Headquarters to develop tools and doctrine to mature our approach to federal and state, local, tribal and territorial partnership development related to recovery.

This includes a Small State and Rural Advocate position which I am excited to announce that we have posted today! This advocate will advise FEMA leadership on, and advocate for, small state and rural community perspectives.

Finally, we are focused on shortening the window between recovery and mitigation phases through innovative approaches.

For instance, in early 2022, FEMA launched the Swift Current initiative to speed up the award of $60 million dollars following a flooding event. We want to get these dollars on the street when the momentum to mitigate these future threats is strong instead of waiting for the annual grant cycle.

However, our first priority needs to be keeping the lived experiences of survivors at the center of our efforts.

For example, we often see survivors struggle to make the difficult decision to leave their home after a disaster.

Mom and dad live down the street – they run a small business that's been in the family for generations, the kids love their school and life simply does not exist anywhere else.

So, what is the solution? How do we keep these families in their community?

There are a few innovative solutions that some of you have put in place that I would like to highlight.

Let's take Alaska's Neighbor Housing Program for example.

The culture of Alaska's remote native villages is about helping one's neighbor.

And when Typhoon Merbok impacted Alaska's coastline last summer, that is exactly what happened.

Neighbors who did not sustain damage from the storm opened their doors to the neighbors who did.

The State of Alaska's Individual Assistance Program provided money to that neighbor to defray the cost of sheltering a survivor.

Now, this might not be something that works for every community, but it might in some.

The Alaska Neighbor Housing Program is an incredible example of a state supported and community-led housing mission that puts the unique needs of people first.

And following the unprecedented flooding in Eastern Kentucky, we remain focused on supporting the state's goal of keeping the impacted community together.

We are working closely with state partners to create new temporary housing sites that could become the basis for permanently relocating community members away from flood-prone areas.

This kind of sustained, broad-based engagement with state partners is a commonsense practice that will serve as a blueprint for future disasters.

The work taking place in Alaska and Kentucky are just a few examples of the powerful of partnerships between all levels of government and the people in the communities we are working to serve.

On a final point of recovery…

Last month, President Biden announced that the national public health emergency will end on May 11. This will also bring an end to all COVID-19 declarations.

COVID-19 marked the first and longest response and recovery incident period where all 50 states, five territories, three tribes, and the District of Columbia received major disaster declarations simultaneously.

And while COVID-19 is no longer the threat that it once was, it fundamentally changed the way we respond and recover from disasters.

We faced food insecurity, housing shortages, the challenges of distance learning, a shock to the global economy, and supply chain issues that persist today.

We responded to catastrophic disasters, stood up complex non-congregate mass care missions, and found new and innovative ways to deliver on our mission.

From transitioning entire workforces to virtual environments to using drones to conduct preliminary damage assessments, we made it work and learned invaluable lessons along the way.

I encourage all of us to keep these experiences close and these new partnerships healthy, because these are lessons of recovery.

I thank you and commend you for the incredible efforts each of you put forth during one of the most challenging chapters of this nation’s history.

We have more work to do, but I commit to you that we will be working alongside you every step of the way.

So, before I go, I want to leave you with two questions.

First, what capacity and capability do your organizations lack when it comes to long-term recovery?

And second, how can we help you get to where you need to be?

These are important questions because as these storms roll in faster and hit us harder, we know that more people like Mary will come to depend on us in the years ahead.

And we know it’s going to take all of us to help these communities in a way that meets their unique needs.

So I ask you to keep speaking up, because we are listening.

And I commit to you today that we are on a mission to be the FEMA you need us to be.

Thank you.