

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Remarks to the NEMA 2022 Mid-Year Forum (Mar. 29, 2022)

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I would like to thank President Bornemann and Vice President Sheehan for inviting me to speak today.

As I look across this room, I see the familiar faces of our nation's frontlines.

I see leaders who have persevered through two years of a pandemic and are stronger because of it.

I see leaders who are not deterred by complexity and challenge but embrace it and live for it.

I see leaders who are ready to face the future, hand-in-hand across state lines, to make this nation safer, stronger, and more resilient from future disasters.

For this, I thank you, I thank NEMA, for not only displaying great compassion and commitment to your communities, but for serving as exceptional examples of what it means to be an emergency manager.

Today, I'm here to talk to you about progress.

Specifically, the progress that we have made as emergency managers in better serving the communities who need our help the most.

You may be asking yourselves, "How has anyone had time to make progress when we're so busy responding to disasters?"

You are not wrong in your thinking, it's a valid question.

However, even in the face of an ongoing pandemic, 21 named storms, year-round wildfires spanning the nation, tornadoes running ground for 200 consecutive miles,



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historic flooding, cyberattacks, and humanitarian crises – we made progress.

And today, I am going to share a few concrete examples of what that progress looks like.

I would like to begin by sharing a few things we have been working on at FEMA.

Last year, we embarked on an incredibly aggressive journey to develop the agency's new strategic plan, a plan that commits to helping communities, like the ones you lead, become more prepared and more resilient.

And most importantly, to help us become the FEMA the nation needs and deserves.

Our goal was for the plan to be reflective of the thoughts of our workforce and external partners.

With NEMA's help, we reached that goal, I am proud to say the plan uplifted the voices of over 1,000 members of FEMA's workforce, 400 external partners, and over 50 Tribal Nations. This was a true ground-up, grass roots effort.

The plan's goals focus on equity, resilience, and a ready and prepared nation.

However, these are not just FEMA's goals; these goals are meant to be shared across the emergency management enterprise.

And you can help us reach them by leading big and bold action in your states and territories.

We need action that brings equity to the forefront of your policies and processes; action that educates your communities on what climate resilience really means; and action that brings disaster mitigation and preparedness center stage.

By doing this together, we can spark a compound effect of generational change in this country.

Change that will make our communities safer and stronger for our future generations to thrive in.

But you know better than anyone that change on this scale can be costly.



That's why when FEMA received a historic \$5.8 billion dollars in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law dedicated solely to hazard mitigation funding, it was clear we had the support of President Biden and of Congress to do this important work.

With this support, FEMA recently announced the launch of our new Swift Current initiative, a program grounded in equity and designed with the survivor in mind.

Through our Flood Mitigation Assistance program, we are pushing \$60 million dollars to flood-prone homeowners in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, 40% of which is headed to underserved communities.

This initiative, the first to be funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, will help homeowners plagued by severe and repetitive loss retrofit, elevate, or even relocate their homes.

And this is just the first of many steps we are taking to make climate resilience a reality for all people in all communities.

But something I believe we can all agree on, is that these federal dollars have the greatest impact when they leave D.C. and make their way to you.

So, as we focus today's discussion on progress, I want to highlight the work you are doing to lead your communities into a safer and more resilient future.

When we talk about bringing diversity and equity to the forefront of a state's disaster mitigation funding, I think about the Maryland Department of Emergency Management's new Revolving Loan Fund.

Director Strickland and his elected state leaders did not waste any time in taking advantage of the newly available FEMA mitigation funding to help the state's smaller, disadvantaged local governments kick start long overdue mitigation efforts.

In fact, they were the very first state in the nation to establish their loan program through FEMA's Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation Act, or STORM Act.

I would like to thank Director Strickland and his team for one, their fantastic leadership, but two, for proving that we can take swift action and get things done



in government when we really want to.

And to the south, Tulsa, Oklahoma just hit a major mitigation milestone, one that exemplifies what it means to put people first.

After years of investing time and funding into going above and beyond in meeting the NFIP's floodplain management requirements, Tulsa just reached Class 1 status of the NFIP's Community Rating System.

Out of the 1,500 cities and counties currently participating in the program, Tulsa is only the 2nd city in the nation to ever attain this status.

So, what does this mean?

This means eligible NFIP policy holders can look forward to a 45% discount on their premiums, an average savings of over \$300 dollars, this is a huge deal and has been no small feat!

When I called to congratulate Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum, he told me that for him, it was never about the money, it was always about saving lives, and I could not agree more.

I would like to thank Director Gower for his state's support in Tulsa's success.

When we last met, we talked about the evolving role of the emergency manager. About the need to prepare as we are increasingly called upon to solve our nation's most complex problems.

And you know better than anyone that this is not an easy job.

You have been entrusted with the great responsibility of staying not two, but ten steps ahead of the future threats we may face, entrusted to protect the homeland, our communities, our neighbors, and our loved ones.

And we must never forget that the public's confidence in government, in each of us, is rooted in our ability to be forward looking, informed, and ready to go when the call comes.



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 how do we get ready?

We must start by collectively shifting to a future-based mindset across the emergency management enterprise.

To help drive the next generation of thought leadership in our profession, FEMA launched a new and exciting executive development leadership program that we believe represents a turning point for our profession.

In partnership with Harvard University, and our partners in the private sector, FEMA's Emergency Management Institute has launched the Vanguard program, a place for our nation's top crisis management executives, just like you, to network, to share knowledge, and help drive emergency management into the future.

Our goal is to bring together our nation's top leaders from every aspect of emergency management, federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, private, academic, and non-profit sectors, to think big and set the bar for where we need to go.

And I am here today to encourage each of you to seriously consider pursuing this opportunity. Our vision is that the Vanguard program will help define the future of emergency management, and we need you in the room leading the way.

At FEMA, we have often said that as our customers, our non-federal partners bring the most valuable perspectives to the table.

So, I think it's about time we bring them completely into the fold.

Therefore, I am very excited to announce FEMA's new staffing exchange program.

This program will bring dedicated public servants from outside the federal government to FEMA Headquarters to embed within our Office of Response and Recovery and the Office of Resilience for a six-month paid detail.



This means we will have local voices in the room helping define emergency management priorities, develop programmatic direction, and help devise key solutions.

And for this to be a true exchange program, we look forward to sending FEMA employees to embed with our state and local partner agencies, too.

Nobody knows the areas for improvement in FEMA's program delivery better than you, our customers, and I know this exchange program will contribute to our collective success.

Information about how to apply will be released soon, and I cannot wait to see some of your teams at our headquarters!

As I close, and in the spirit of progress, I challenge you.

I challenge you to inspire your local partners to adopt a future-based mindset. This will help fuel innovative thinking that will help us anticipate risks that are 10, 20, 30 years down the road.

I challenge you to bring equity to the forefront of your policies and processes. This will help all people in all communities recover faster and build back stronger.

I challenge you to help us pull mitigation and preparedness out from behind the shadows of response and recovery. This will help us re-focus our efforts on proactively reducing impacts rather than waiting to react to the inevitable.

And most importantly, I challenge you to put people first in everything you do. Because if we are not doing that, then we are just not doing our jobs.

Thank you for welcoming me today, and for doing everything that you do.

