

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell Expands Role of FEMA's Office of External Affairs, Emphasizes FEMA's Commitment to Partnership and Cultural Competency

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The Office of External Affairs to Host First-Ever National Summit on Risk Communications, Crisis Communications, and Community Engagement

WASHINGTON -- FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell advanced the Office of External Affairs by changing the titles of Director Justin Ángel Knighten and Deputy Director Lucas Hitt to Associate Administrator and Deputy Associate Administrator. The title elevation acknowledges the growth and office's heightened focus on advancing equity, climate resilience, readiness, building partnerships and operationalizing FEMA's community engagement work.

"As an agency and across external affairs, we strive to become more culturally competent before, during and after disaster to better understand, communicate and interact with people across communities and cultures. The ever-expanding communications landscape has made building and maintaining trust in our mission and message more important and more challenging than ever before," said Associate Administrator Knighten. "As FEMA Administrator Criswell has said, we are successful when we put people first. We are prioritizing and strengthening how we listen, learn and design strategies responsive to the needs of people that create the meaningful connections and changes in behavior critical in all phases of resilience building, response and recovery."

"Accurate, reliable and accessible information is an essential commodity for survivors and the public when disasters strike and across the recovery process and that's this team's mission," said Deputy Associate Administrator Hitt. "Our office remains more committed than ever to ensuring that every community



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has a seat at the table and are partners in our work to help people before, during and after disasters.”

While FEMA is typically recognized as a preparedness, response and recovery agency, now more than ever, the Office of External Affairs is leading yet another space for the agency – that of resiliency. The Office of External Affairs is directing the 2024 Year of Resilience communications campaign, which is an opportunity to share best resilience practices, advance new innovative ideas and protect even more people in disaster’s path.

Additionally, under the office leadership, the nation’s preparedness [Ready](#) and [Listo](#) campaigns, in partnership with the Ad Council, were shifted to be accessible and culturally competent, with a focus on targeting communities disproportionately impacted by the hazards that continue to threaten our nation. The campaign expanded outreach to [Latino](#), [Black and African American](#) and [older adult](#) communities, including [people with disabilities](#), those living in rural areas and those with limited resources. To prepare the nation for the extreme temperatures becoming more prevalent across the country, the Ready campaign also launched the inaugural awareness initiatives — #SummerReady for extreme heat and #WinterReady for extreme cold to help communities build resilience ahead of extreme weather events.

Acknowledging that disaster planning and response takes a whole community of effective communicators, on June 10, 2024, the Office will host FEMA’s first-ever National Summit on Risk Communications, Crisis Communications and Community Engagement. The Summit will convene communicators across federal government, emergency management, government at all levels, academics and cross-sector partners who are on the front-line of the climate and emerging hazard crises.

The Office of External Affairs encompasses six divisions including Public Affairs and Planning, Intergovernmental Affairs, Congressional Affairs, Coordination Business Operations, Disaster Operations and Communications as well as ten regional external affairs offices and a talented cadre of external affairs field staff supporting survivors across the nation. The Office continues to remain committed to enhancing storytelling, improving accessibility, building relationships, championing communities and fostering a learning culture.



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- **Enhancing Storytelling:** Over the past year, the Public Affairs and Planning Division has enhanced the FEMA’s storytelling capabilities on recovery operations and building a more resilient nation, providing strategic counsel and advising agency leadership on how to communicate policies, programs and changes. The Communications Division has improved customer experience through its main digital services FEMA.gov, Ready.gov, the FEMA App and the agency’s social media platforms.
- **Improving Accessibility:** The agency launched a new FEMA.gov homepage to highlight FEMA’s work across the country while making it easier for people to access the agency’s most popular services. Additionally, the FEMA App, available in English and Spanish languages, was completely redesigned in 2022 based on customer feedback to be a personalized resource to help people plan before, protect themselves during and recover after disasters. Providing accessible materials in 30 different languages in 2023, the office also expanded the language services team so that the agency can reach disaster survivors in every community.
- **Building Relationships:** The office continues to strengthen the agency’s collaboration and coordination with partners and the American people. Last year, the Intergovernmental Affairs Division engaged in nearly 300 stakeholder engagements and over 100 tribal nation engagements. The Congressional Affairs Division engaged in nearly 400 engagements. FEMA’s External Affairs Cadre members— which represents 600+ deployable external affairs practitioners —work in the areas experiencing devastation caused by a disaster engaging stakeholders in Congress, the news media, state, local, tribal and territorial governments, and the private sector. The Office of External Affairs collaborates with the agency’s full network of external affairs assets, which includes teams in each of the ten FEMA regional offices, leads on all national and regional Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT) and beyond.
- **Championing Communities:** The office became the home to first-ever National Tribal Affairs Advocate, who advises the Administrator and the agency on Tribal Affairs, while working to ensure that FEMA lives up to its treaty and trust responsibilities to Tribal Nations. The office brought on the Small State and Rural Advocate, who works to make sure that the unique challenges and needs of small towns and rural areas are addressed in our disaster preparedness, response, mitigation and recovery.
- **Fostering a culture of Learning:** The office worked with staff from the State Department and International Rescue Committee to design a training on building trust, supporting historically underserved populations and meeting



people where they are. External affairs teams across the agency have been learning from this experience, and the many other learning opportunities designed to keep teams on the cutting edge of communication trends and engagement strategies, to help people.



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