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Disaster Capacity in the National Capital Region: Experiences, Capabilities and Weaknesses

STATEMENT OF
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I welcome today's witnesses to the subcommittee hearing on disaster preparedness and response here the National Capital Region.

Today we are interested to hear from emergency managers and first responders on the steps they are taking to prepare for and respond to incidents of all types. We thank all of them for their testimony. Our region faces most of the same risks as any other major metropolitan area including, natural disasters, man-made disasters, fires and of course violent crime including gun violence. In addition, because this is our Nation's capital, we also face additional threats including terrorism, as well as challenges in preparing for and responding to those threats.

The unique nature of the National Capital Region brings distinct jurisdictional and logistical challenges in preparing for and responding to disasters and emergencies. Unlike most, if not all states, there is not one person, the governor, who is ultimately in charge of coordinating disaster response activities. There are even some areas of the District where the Mayor's powers are limited i.e., Federal property in the District.

Even within the Federal Government there are a myriad of agencies with responsibilities and jurisdiction in the executive branch agencies, such as DHS, and the National Park Service. Using law enforcement as an example the Metropolitan Police Department has arranged to work with no less than 32 Federal police agencies. At least in the case of executive branch agencies, ultimately they all report to the President and therefore if need be jurisdictional or other concerns can be addressed. However significant areas of the city are under the jurisdiction of Congress most notably the Capitol Grounds. All of these factors make planning and coordination between these agencies critical.

The recent inauguration of the President was one of the largest events ever held in the Nation's Capital with an estimated two million people in attendance. The event was a key example of what makes our Nation's Capital unique. It highlighted the critical need for planning and coordination. While the event was large, and involved a large number of agencies, the event was also planned well in advance. However even with this planning there were a number of problems with the inauguration that required further review. Most notably were issues related to the Third Street Tunnel and those citizens who were holding

“purple tickets”. In a recent hearing, Federal officials acknowledged that many key decision makers did not know that there were citizens who were “stuck” in the Third Street Tunnel. This was for an event that was not only foreseeable, but had been planned for months if not years in advance. It is unfathomable to think how these same entities would respond to an event with little or no notice such as a natural disaster or a hazmat incident.

The lead Federal agency in preparing for and responding to disasters and emergencies of all types is the Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA's Office of National Capital Region Coordination (NCRC) was created by statute in 2002. FEMA NCRC oversees and coordinates FEMA programs for and relationships with State, local, and regional authorities in the National Capital Region as well as appropriate with the private sector. This office which is in part of FEMA's headquarters does much of the day to day emergency management planning that in other metropolitan areas are handled by the appropriate FEMA regional office. However the FEMA NCRC office is not an operational office. When an incident occurs or is likely to occur, it is the FEMA regional office, in this case the FEMA Region III office in Philadelphia who has responsibilities to work with the affected states (including the District of Columbia) and other Federal agencies. Today we will receive testimony from the heads of both the FEMA NCRC office and the FEMA Region III office on how these offices work together as well as with their partners in the National Capital Region.

One of the key responders in any disaster is the National Guard. Unlike the Governors, of the 50 States, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands, the Mayor of the

District of Columbia is not the Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard of the District of Columbia, rather the President is the Commander in Chief. Therefore unlike the Governors the Mayor cannot directly call out the National Guard to respond to a disaster or other incidents. In today's hearing we look forward to hearing from the Commanding General of the D.C. National Guard as well as District and other officials as to how the D.C. Guard responds to incidents.

While it is important to focus on how agencies and institutions work, we can never lose sight of the primary mission of emergency managers and first responders which is to protect the citizens of this region. Today we will hear from our witnesses, including government officials and the Red Cross on how they provide for evacuation and sheltering for citizens of the District of Columbia in response to disasters and other emergencies. We will also receive testimony from Prince George's County, Maryland on their plans to receive evacuees should that need ever arise.

This morning we are pleased to hear from the experts who, if the needs arise, will be on the "front lines" and the subcommittee and the public better understand what they will do to ensure the public's safety.