



STATE OF FLORIDA DIVISION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT



Ron DeSantis, Governor

Kevin Guthrie, Executive Director

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Florida Division of Emergency Management

WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
On behalf of the State of Florida

Submitted to the:
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management
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Reforming FEMA: Bringing Common Sense Back to Federal Emergency Management.

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and other distinguished members of the Committee for the invitation to testify here today.

I am Kevin Guthrie, Executive Director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM). Today I want to share with you what I know about Emergency Management. Due to the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis, the State of Florida and FDEM are proud to have become a model for the future of emergency management. Florida's success is also directly tied to the dedication of our emergency management professionals and experience that comes with being in a disaster-prone state.

Leading the profession in prepared and resilient communities, staff members provide technical assistance to local governments as they prepare emergency plans and procedures, as well as conduct emergency operations training for state and local governmental agencies with the mission of coordinating, collaborating and communicating with all community stakeholders for a more resilient Florida. As Executive Director and on behalf of my colleagues in State and Local emergency management, we thank you for this opportunity to provide a state perspective on the future of Federal Emergency Management. We are excited to work with you and President Trump's Administration to empower states in their emergency management efforts.

DISASTER HISTORY

Regarding disasters, as Executive Director, I have led the agency through numerous significant events, including Hurricanes Debby, Helene, Milton, Idalia, Ian, Nicole, Michael, Dorian, Isaias, Sally, and Eta, as well as Tropical Storms Elsa and Fred. Besides tropical systems, I have provided support to Floridians through a variety of events, including the tragic Surfside Building Collapse, wildfires, tornadoes, floods and more. We have also assisted efforts in the nation's fight against illegal immigration through Operation Vigilant Sentry in Florida and Operation Lone Star in Texas. Additionally, in my broader 30 plus years of experience, I have responded to, assisted in leading, or led the operations of over 50 additional incidents or events in Florida or across the nation.

STATE MANAGEMENT

We maintain our emergency management approach with conservative principles, emphasizing that emergencies should be federally supported, state-managed, and locally executed. Where possible, we utilize the federal government to bolster, rather than obstruct, state and local disaster response efforts. Local response efforts are amplified and supported by the State rather than dictated. Where additional support is needed, the Florida Division of Emergency Management does not hesitate to fill the need but does not take control or micromanage a response. We do not dictate what a local response looks like. Our willingness to support locals in their varied response efforts allows us to identify the best practices which are then shared and improved disaster after disaster. Again, we lead the industry in the field, but we are not perfect and believe in constant improvement at all ends of the emergency management system.



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Regarding federal support, the potential implementation of block grants for emergency management is an exciting development. With a block grant, an allocation of funding is provided to meet a given purpose such as response or recovery operations. If it is properly and consistently utilized within the criteria determined by the federal government, bureaucratic delays at the federal level are removed and states can push out the funding more quickly and effectively. Block grants may also allow for large-scale decreases in the administrative functions at the federal level.

AMPLIFICATION OF EFFORTS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

FDEM is made up of 225 full-time employees and approximately 170 temporary employees. During a disaster, we activate our State Emergency Response Team (SERT) to maximize our capabilities. The SERT consists of our federal partners, State agencies, local emergency management, and private sector industries such as power, water, lodging, grocery, equipment, and materials. Additionally, Florida's First Lady, Casey DeSantis, has activated charitable foundations, volunteer organizations, and the faith community as part of our State Emergency Response Team (SERT). These entities provide tremendous assistance to disaster survivors without cost to the State. This assistance includes disaster cleanup, reconstruction, housing assistance, meal service, transportation, and more.

We are not afraid of leaning on and empowering the private sector to improve our response and recovery efforts. In many facets of emergency management, the State and local governments rely on the private sector to do the essentials, whether that be restoring power, removing debris, or getting businesses operational as quickly as possible to create the necessary environment for a speedy recovery. We are not afraid of the private sector and do not care about logos or patches during a disaster. We care only about getting the job done.

STATE AND LOCAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ENHANCED BY FEDERAL SUPPORT

FDEM operates 24/7, 365 days a year regardless of activation level or disaster status. Our staff must maintain operations continually to be ready to respond to natural and man-made disasters. In the event of a weather event, we usually have notice and ability to make final preparations prior to the disaster. In other cases, no-notice disasters specifically, our team activates to full capacity and may activate the entire SERT. To satisfy continual operations for the State and local emergency management agencies, funding is necessary on a non-disaster cycle. Base FEMA grants currently fund much of these continual operations. Any change or end to these base grants would necessitate an alternative funding source either through the State or local governments. In the same way that a government continually funds its Law Enforcement and Fire Departments, State and local governments must find a way to establish emergency management functions without Federal financial support for blue sky periods. This will look different state-by-state and government-by-government. For more populous states, a stand-alone State-funded emergency management agency is certainly possible. In less populous states, incorporating the functions of an emergency management agency into existing capabilities such as the National Guard could be an option. Locally, in rural areas, incorporating the emergency management functions into the Sheriffs' offices or fire



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departments is expected. In metropolitan areas, the emergency management functions could be stand-alone due to the larger tax base.

When public safety, health, and critical infrastructure agencies need help they call on Emergency Management. Therefore, Emergency Management is a public safety agency and it is incumbent upon each government to treat it as such. This means providing funding and resources within existing resources and capabilities. Regardless of how each state or local government would establish emergency management functions without federal financial assistance, it is critical that all federal support be focused on expanding capability rather than maintaining capability. Federal grants should not support long-term staffing at the State or local level.

With this new paradigm in place, federal support can be targeted specifically for disaster events as the needs arise, and without a large bureaucracy in place at the federal level.

EMBRACING STANDARDIZATION OF DATA AND IMPROVED TECHNOLOGY

FDEM has embraced modern technology to improve how data is used for operations. The first step in embracing technology is to streamline business operations and gain efficiencies to digitize current document workflows. The second step is to focus on the inputs of good, structured, digital information into the system(s) at the lowest possible level eliminating the need for bureaucratic reviews and approvals. In Florida, this has accelerated disaster response efforts, improved efficiency, reduced bureaucratic delays, and expedited payment processing after disasters. Efforts have not only helped the State work faster during an emergency but also ensure taxpayer money is managed responsibly. Embracing technology and activating data assets directly impacts our ability to ensure residents can recover and the economy can get back up and running faster than ever before.

We have seen tremendous returns on investment in technology. For every dollar targeted at technology modernization, we have an estimated \$530 in business efficiency. Additionally, the time it takes to process thousands of invoices following a disaster has decreased by 73%. During Hurricane Ian, FDEM averaged 61 days to process invoices. For Hurricanes Debby, Helene, and Milton, this improved to just 16 days.

The inability of data to flow from local to state to federal government through efficient use of technology is responsible for the delays and years long frustrations experienced in emergency management. We have proven that these delays can be reduced by up to 90% in some cases, all while decreasing long-term and temporary staffing needs.

Collecting, analyzing, and governing relevant data is integral for providing reliable, actionable information for emergency operation decision-makers before, during, and after an emergency. We deployed an anomaly detector to identify and mitigate financial risks, including potential fraud, waste, and abuse, by detecting abnormalities when processing invoices for payment. With 99% accuracy, the anomaly detector identified three major invoice irregularities in the first 30 days.



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Data is essential for Federal, State, and local officials as well as emergency management leaders charged with protecting and serving residents. By leveraging advanced analytics and machine learning, FDEM has empowered its leaders to transition from manual information collection and research into a modern, data-drive approach.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE COMPACT (EMAC)

In the event of large disasters, the Federal government has supported Florida financially and operationally. Additionally, states across our nation have lent support to Florida when we have needed it most.

Since 2022, Florida has leveraged the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) to request aid during six (6) disaster events. Over these incidents, 39 states across the nation stepped up to assist Florida by providing crucial assistance and bolstering Florida's response efforts. Through EMAC, Florida has received essential assets such as Swiftwater and Urban Search & Rescue (USAR) teams, fire response units, Incident Management Teams (IMTs), Emergency Operations Center (EOC) support, voluntary liaisons, and National Guard assistance. These resources play a critical role in ensuring an effective disaster response.

Throughout the six (6) disasters since 2022, including Operation Vigilant Sentry (OVS) and five (5) hurricanes – Ian, Idalia, Debby, Helene, and Milton, Florida has received a total of 7,444 personnel and associated equipment with total costs amounting to \$74,731,312.50. These coordinated efforts have been instrumental in helping the state navigate disaster impacts over the past several years.

The successful coordination of the EMAC, financially supported by the federal government, has been essential in ensuring states receive the aid they need when they lack the necessary resources to respond and recover independently. We want the federal government to continue administering and supporting EMAC to facilitate efficient and effective disaster response across the country.

While many states, including Florida, have received significant financial support from American taxpayers during disasters, few states could fully fund disaster response and recovery without federal assistance. Thanks to responsible fiscal stewardship and a positive economic climate, Florida remains resilient—but ongoing federal support remains critical in times of crisis.

ADDITIONAL FEDERAL EFFICIENCIES

Combined Federal Disaster Declaration: When a disaster occurs, the federal government often claims to bring all forces to bear in response. Unfortunately, this is not always the case due to separate disaster declaration processes for different federal agencies. While a declaration by the President may be declared quickly for FEMA, other agencies such as the US Department of Agriculture or the US Department of Commerce (Fisheries and Aquaculture) require a separate lengthy process for disaster declaration. This separate process leads to significant delays in response to the agriculture and aquaculture industries. A combined declaration for all federal agencies would end these delays.



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Data Sharing: During response and recovery, the State and Federal agencies are often duplicating data gathering efforts as there is no “one-stop-shop” for services. Disaster survivors are constantly filling out federal and state forms, applications, portals, and more. While there are challenges associated with data sharing, it is absolutely crippling for federal agencies to be prohibited from data sharing agreements with the State and locals. Remedying data sharing issues, as part of an annual “blue sky” process, will ensure a coordinated and less burdensome delivery of services to survivors, rather than duplicative and siloed data collection efforts and programs.

Disaster Case Management: For disaster survivors, case management is a lengthy process, severely limiting available services and resources to survivors until months after the event occurred. By the time resources become available, many survivors have moved away or missed crucial deadlines in applications for assistance. The recovery of a community is stifled when its population moves away. Ensuring rapid deployment of disaster case management and funding can get survivors back on their feet more quickly will reduce the long-term costs of extended displacement.

Disaster Grant Closeout Procedures: Current policy implies that all work must be completed on a public assistance project prior to application for reimbursement. This requirement causes excessive delay and long-term extension of disaster closeout and creates significant vulnerability to de-obligation. Allowing grants to cover partial work will facilitate quicker project accomplishment while getting funding to those communities that struggle to facilitate project completion due to limited revenues and cash flow.

BEST PRACTICES

Warehousing & Deployable Resources: The Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) maintains a network of strategically located warehouses, each designed to fulfill critical functions in statewide emergency response and disaster preparedness. These facilities serve as primary distribution hubs for essential resources, ensuring that life-sustaining supplies such as food, water, and emergency equipment are readily available for rapid deployment when disasters strike. In routine operations and smaller-scale emergencies, we are responsible for maintaining operational readiness, overseeing inventory management, and coordinating response efforts. However, in the event of a large-scale activation, additional surge personnel, including contractors, National Guardsmen, and State Guardsmen—are mobilized to expedite the efficient deployment of critical commodities. Beyond basic supplies, FDEM’s warehouses are equipped with a wide range of specialized assets designed to support complex emergency operations. These include power generation equipment, high-capacity water pumps, personal protective equipment (PPE), flood prevention systems, mobile command vehicles (MCVs), heavy machinery, and sleeper trailers to accommodate on-site response teams. By maintaining these resources, we bolster the state’s ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies, mitigate disaster impacts, and safeguard lives and property.

Emergency Standby Contracts: FDEM has implemented Emergency Standby Contracts as a proactive disaster management strategy, recognized as a national best practice. These pre-established agreements



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allow vendors to stage and procure critical resources in advance, ensuring faster, more efficient response efforts. This approach streamlines logistics, reduces delays, and helps protect lives and property by securing essential personnel, equipment, and supplies ahead of time. The contracts cover vital resources such as disaster support personnel, incident management teams, shelter staffing, medical personnel, care sites, transportation services, equipment, and emergency fuels. Contracts for emergency supplies and services—mirror best practices found in our state-level logistics operations (e.g., resource bundling, turn-key solutions, multiple vendors, allow for state/local level piggy backing, etc.). This cuts red tape during procurement, accelerates resource deployment, and leverages economies of scale.

Routine Cycle of Preparedness: Throughout the year, the Florida State Emergency Resource Team (SERT) focuses on routine communication with our local, state, and contracted partners. Florida’s emergency management framework is robust. The SERT is one of the most experienced in the Nation and is well-suited to address a wide range of complex incidents and events. For most natural and man-made emergencies, our state-level capacity, including rapid incident monitoring, logistical support, and specialized technical expertise (e.g., nuclear and radiological preparedness), ensures we can respond effectively. To better respond to these disasters, the SERT has digitized many of our mutual aid processes to include the FEMA reimbursement document. These efforts have allowed for quicker response and reimbursement for our first responders. Florida is the centralized emergency management coordination hub for disasters. To continue to excel in this, the SERT coordinates meetings with city, county, and tribal partners to forecast potential challenges and develop plans to address concerns. Quarterly, the SERT meets with command staff to strategize and discuss how to better respond to natural and man-made disasters. It is through these partnerships and routine communications that Florida leads the nation in mutual aid support provided across the country and our response times during a disaster.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Emergency Management is critical, and the time is now to implement improvements that will change the way we do business and ultimately better serve the citizens of the United States.