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ON BEHALF OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

HEARING TITLED REFORMING FEMA: ENSURING THE NATION'S DISASTER READINESS WORKS FOR AMERICANS
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important role counties play in disaster response, recovery and mitigation.

My name is Cynthia Lee Sheng, and I serve as Parish President of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. I also serve as Co-Chair of NACo's Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force.

NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States, including Alaska's boroughs and Louisiana's parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities. NACo works to strengthen county resiliency by advocating for federal policies and programs that help county leaders identify and manage risk and allow counties to become more flexible and responsive to disasters. Through sustainable practices and infrastructure, counties become better prepared to address these issues in a manner that can minimize the impact on our residents and businesses.

With a population of more than 430,000 residents and a total area of 665 square miles, Jefferson Parish is Louisiana's second largest parish. Situated in one of the most southern parts of a Gulf Coast state, we are geographically vulnerable – more than 50% of our parish is comprised of wetlands, bayous and open water. Because of this, and the nationwide attention on Hurricanes Katrina and Ida, many assume that all of our emergencies in Jefferson Parish are hurricane related. While hurricanes continue to remain one of our most significant challenges, our recent emergency management experience extends well beyond tropical weather.

Just last month in Jefferson Parish, we responded to two tornadoes in one day from a tropical storm. But in recent years we've also endured 43 consecutive days of record-breaking heat, which contributed to a saltwater intrusion event that threatened our entire drinking water supply. This extended drought also created soil conditions which caused a major waterline break forcing us to shut off water to nearly 100,000 residents. And in 2025, our region experienced approximately 9 inches of snow – an unprecedented occurrence that created challenging emergency conditions we had to manage in entirely different ways. These widespread experiences underscore the evolving hazards we must be prepared to manage as our threats become more diverse, more unpredictable and more complex.

Paramount among other critical county responsibilities is the role of counties in community preparedness. Counties are on the front lines of defense before, during and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Following a disaster, local elected officials and emergency managers are often the first on the scene and play a key role in the coordination of local emergency management efforts. Other key county staff involved in pre- and post-disaster efforts include local police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, because counties are major owners of public infrastructure, we are also uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters before they occur. Collectively, we own 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, over 650 nursing homes and directly support a third of the nation's airports and public transit systems. We also own and maintain a wide variety of public safety infrastructure, including roadside ditches, flood control channels, stormwater culverts and pipes and other infrastructure used to funnel water away from low-lying roads, properties and businesses. Counties provide extensive outreach and education to residents on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters, and we work to reduce water pollution, adopt setbacks for land use plans and are responsible for water recharge areas, green infrastructure and water conservation programs.

Over the past 20 years, natural and man-made disasters have increased in frequency, severity and cost. Roughly 900 counties – representing almost one third of all counties – experience at least one presidentially declared disaster each year, with many receiving multiple designations. In 2025, the nation experienced 23 separate billion-dollar disasters, which resulted in over $115 billion damages.

As a result of this uptick in frequency and cost, NACo launched the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force to strengthen our nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery capabilities. The Task Force brings together county officials from across the country to advocate for practical, common-sense reforms that improve disaster response, recovery and mitigation. Given that counties are on the frontlines of disaster management, our direct involvement in federal policy reforms is essential to ensure that policies are practical, effective and address the unique challenges faced by local communities. By having a seat at the table, counties can advocate for streamlined processes and resources tailored to our specific needs, leading to more resilient and prepared communities nationwide.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation. Rather, we are a part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from both natural and man-made disasters. Like the federal government, counties are entrusted by taxpayers to provide a variety of important services to our residents, and we stand ready to work with our intergovernmental counterparts to improve community resiliency and mitigate the impacts of future disasters. To this end, counties offer the following considerations:

1. **The *FEMA Act* (H.R. 4669) provides a strong, bipartisan framework to modernize the nation's disaster response and recovery system, and Congress should advance its core provisions without delay.**

2. **Streamlining disaster assistance and environmental review processes will cut red tape and speed recovery for survivors and local governments alike.**

3. **County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.**

The *FEMA Act* (H.R. 4669) provides a strong, bipartisan framework to modernize the nation's disaster response and recovery system, and Congress should advance its core provisions

without delay.
Disaster response, recovery and mitigation starts local and ends local. Counties across the country are currently managing large scale recovery efforts, while simultaneously continuing to meet our daily responsibilities around ensuring our communities remain safe and resilient to the next disaster. While we are doing our part at the local level, effective response and recovery efforts would not be possible without the continued support from agencies like FEMA, who administer programs that provide vital resources before, during and after disasters. Without FEMA, state and local governments would face significant challenges in recovering from disaster due to limited resources and coordination capabilities.

However, FEMA's effectiveness is often hindered by inflexible decision-making processes and excessive bureaucratic red tape, highlighting the need for reform. The agency's layered approval procedures and complex administrative requirements can delay the delivery of critical resources to communities in need. We have heard countless examples from counties about the challenges of navigating FEMA's stringent application processes and slow response times. Streamlining decision-making, increasing transparency, and reducing unnecessary administrative barriers would allow FEMA to respond more swiftly and effectively, ensuring communities receive timely support in the aftermath of a disaster.

One such program that is in desperate need of reform is FEMA's Public Assistance (PA) Program. PA is crucial for helping communities rebuild after disasters, but the lengthy process to receive reimbursement can delay recovery efforts and hinder our ability to restore critical services post disaster. In 2024, NACo conducted a survey of members that concluded that one in five counties (20 percent) longest open PA claim had been in processing between four and six years; almost a third of respondents (28 percent) reported processing times exceeding six years. For counties with all outstanding claims paid, the majority (71 percent) report typical turnaround times between one and three years. Because PA operates as a reimbursement, the cost of response efforts is paid upfront using county funds placing significant financial strain on counties, who are often forced to take out large loans to cover upfront disaster costs.

NACo strongly supports the *FEMA Act's* transition of the Public Assistance program from a reimbursement to a grant-based model, which would provide funding upfront, reduce counties' reliance on short-term borrowing and allow recovery efforts to begin immediately. This reform is critical to stabilizing local finances and accelerating rebuilding timelines. The FEMA Act also incorporates the NACo-supported *FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act*, allowing FEMA to reimburse interest on disaster-related loans so that local governments are not financially penalized for acting quickly in an emergency. Together, these reforms would ensure that recovery efforts are not delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles or financial barriers, ultimately allowing communities to rebuild faster and more effectively. Having passed the Committee on a strong bipartisan vote of 57-3, the FEMA Act is ready for action by the full House, and we urge its swift consideration.

Streamlining disaster assistance and environmental review processes will cut red tape and speed recovery for survivors and local governments alike.
Unfortunately, bureaucratic red tape follows a disaster. For example, requiring the completion of complex and overly burdensome paperwork by communities who may be entirely unfamiliar with system protocols and who are attempting to undertake these processes during the most stressful times of their lives can significantly impede progress when it is needed most. Populations that feel the biggest impact are often our underserved and disadvantaged communities where resources

and capacity to complete applications and meet critical deadlines can be severely exacerbated.

Ensuring no communities are left behind requires reexamining current procedures when applying for federal funding. Implementing plain language into applications, providing clear timelines and identifying resources available to assist applicants during the process are paramount to improving the resiliency of our communities. Excessive paperwork and lack of clarity can be particularly difficult for jurisdictions who may be under resourced or dealing with co-occurring disasters, as we saw with many parts of the country throughout the last few years.

The *FEMA Act* addresses this problem directly by establishing a universal disaster assistance application. Today, disaster survivors must navigate multiple agencies and duplicative applications to access relief. A universal application would streamline access to federal assistance, reduce administrative burdens and ensure survivors can more quickly receive the help they need through a single, coordinated process. The FEMA Act would also streamline Environmental and Historic Preservation (EHP) reviews, which frequently delay critical recovery projects through lengthy and duplicative processes. Streamlining these reviews would reduce unnecessary delays and accelerate project delivery, while still maintaining appropriate environmental protections.

Equally important to counties is the FEMA Act's procurement waiver, which clarifies that for purposes of federal procurement regulations, local governments are treated the same as states and Tribal governments. Under current practice, counties are frequently required to follow federal procurement standards that are far more restrictive than the standards states use, even though counties are just as capable of managing contracts responsibly and often have our own well-established procurement rules already in place. This mismatch slows down the deployment of contractors for debris removal, emergency repairs and other urgent recovery work in the critical days and weeks following a disaster. Allowing counties to rely on our own procurement procedures, consistent with the flexibility already extended to states, would remove a significant and unnecessary obstacle to rapid disaster response and is one of the most important reforms counties have called for throughout this process.

Counties have long supported this same goal through legislation like the *Disaster Survivors Fairness Act* (H.R.1245) and the *Disaster Assistance Simplification Act* (S.861), and we are glad to see their spirit reflected in the FEMA Act's reforms.

County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.

Counties across the country are working daily to address the needs of our residents and make decisions that drive the success of our jurisdictions. While we are doing our part at the local level, 45 states limit the ability of counties to raise revenue in various ways, making the intergovernmental partnership vital to meeting our public sector responsibilities. Only 29 states authorize counties to collect sales taxes, but almost always under various restrictions. 26 states impose a sales tax limit and 19 require voter approval. For western counties, who are at great risk of flooding and wildfires, state restrictions on local revenues can be even more impactful, as much of the land within western county boundaries is considered federal land, thus removing the ability of a county to levy property taxes.

While disasters are inherently local, counties rely on our state and federal partners for critical disaster recovery tools, like funding assistance, human capital and technical assistance. Without proper federal and state support, county recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full capabilities necessary to rebuild our communities and make them more resilient against future disasters. In an environment where counties have limited financial flexibility, a strong intergovernmental partnership is crucial to community recovery and key to the success of future mitigation efforts.

With that in mind, Congress should prioritize legislation that seeks to strengthen intergovernmental partnerships in disaster recovery by enhancing coordination, streamlining communication and supporting resource-sharing between all levels of government. By promoting pre-disaster planning, simplifying aid processes and supporting local recovery efforts, lawmakers can ensure a more effective and coordinated response to disasters.

Conclusion

Counties are on the front lines of the pre- and post-disaster efforts, and without proper federal assistance, recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full support necessary to rebuild our communities and return the lives of our residents to normal.

Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you again for inviting me to testify here today.

Counties stand ready to work side-by-side with our federal and state partners to make our communities more resilient and ensure the health, well-being and safety of our citizens.