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**TESTIMONY OF MARITA C. WENNER  
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AMERICAN RED CROSS**

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications  
United States House of Representatives**

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Members and staff of the Subcommittee. I am honored to appear today on behalf of the American Red Cross. My name is Marita C. Wenner and I serve as the Volunteer Chair of the Pennsylvania State Disaster Committee of the American Red Cross. I previously served, for 17 years, as the Executive Director of the Wayne Pike Chapter of the American Red Cross and am currently the Chairman of the Board. I am a resident of this community and would especially like to acknowledge Vice Chairman Tom Marino for his leadership as we continue to recover from the impact of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee as well as his role in bringing this important hearing to Northeast Pennsylvania.

I started my Red Cross career responding to single family house fires in Wayne and Pike counties, helping my neighbors recover from the devastation of losing all their belongings, having nowhere to go, not knowing what to do next. I am one of thousands of Red Cross volunteers who respond to disasters across the country when the need arises. Over the past 20 years, I have learned that whether it is a house fire or a catastrophic disaster event, people have the same concerns and needs. They need information on where to go for help, how to begin their recovery, and most of all they need someone to listen to their story with a caring heart. This is a small part of what the American Red Cross does in times of disaster and I am very fortunate to be a part of this outstanding organization.

Since its founding in 1881, our nation has turned to the American Red Cross in emergency situations. As part of its mission, the Red Cross has provided shelter, food, clothing, emotional and other support to those impacted by disasters in communities across the country and around the world. We supply nearly half of the nation's blood. We teach lifesaving skills to hundreds of thousands of people each year, and we provide resources to the members of the military and their families. Whether it is a hurricane or a heart attack, a call for blood or a call for help, the Red Cross is there.

Today's hearing topic, *"Ensuring Effective Preparedness and Response: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee"* is of vital interest to the Red Cross and particularly important to me and my colleagues serving both nationally and here in Pennsylvania. This has been a historic year for disaster response--beginning in the spring with an unprecedented

number of severe storms and tornados that culminated with Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our operation details and thoughts on best practices in preparation for future events.

### **Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee**

As you may know, Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee caused devastating flood and wind damage in communities from North Carolina to New England, affecting millions of residents. These historic storms flooded roads, damaged and destroyed homes, caused power outages and prompted the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of families across the eastern seaboard.

In response to the threat of Hurricane Irene, the Red Cross mobilized a massive response and urged residents to prepare for Irene's impact. Thousands of pre-packaged meals were deployed from North Carolina to Maine. In addition, approximately 250 emergency response vehicles were placed on alert and mobilized to support disaster relief operations in many of the coastal states. As Irene made landfall, more than 27,000 people found a safe haven in approximately 500 shelters. By September 7, 2011, alongside community and government partners, the Red Cross had provided 1.8 million meals and snacks, opened 492 shelters, provided 22,000 health and mental health consultations, and distributed nearly 127,000 relief items.

After Tropical Storm Lee hit, some residents returned to find homes that were damaged beyond repair. Red Cross shelters remained open in New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and New Jersey to house those still displaced for several weeks after these storms made landfall. To help families with the task of clearing their homes of debris and mud, the Red Cross provided over 55,000 cleanup kits and hundreds of thousands of other relief items to aid those affected.

I was dispatched along with many other volunteers prior to landfall of Hurricane Irene to the Red Cross Chapter in New York City, where I worked directing the preparedness activities anticipating what might be one of the worst natural disasters the city and state had ever encountered. Post landfall, the valuable lessons we have learned from past catastrophic hurricanes helped us to mount an integrated and collaborative response with our government and non-government partners across the northeast United States. After two weeks in New York, I shifted focus to Pennsylvania. I was quickly sent to help coordinate the efforts of the Pennsylvania chapter. With my experience of prior flooding events in Pennsylvania I understood the enormous disaster implications of the predicted amount of rain that was falling across the area.

Over the years, the Pennsylvania Red Cross has made great progress, using our resources, both material and human, to our best advantage during disasters. We have developed regional systems to respond quickly and assess the resources needed to help our neighbors during disasters. We work closely with our partner agencies to identify the disaster caused needs of our communities and work collaboratively for a timely response. This disaster would test our preparedness and become an unprecedented Pennsylvania response. We were able to rapidly move people and supplies from unaffected areas of the state, such as Erie and Pittsburg to the affected Central and Northeast areas, such as Pine Grove, Bloomsburg, Wilkes-Barre, Sayre and Tunkhannock. As disaster needs increased and evolved, we relied on assets from our national system to support our statewide response.

## **American Red Cross Services – What We Do In Times of Disaster**

Our citizens rely on the American Red Cross to provide comfort and care during an emergency. The American Red Cross will be there to provide the basics of food, shelter and a shoulder to lean on in times of disaster. But it is important to know the details of these services and I would like to take a moment to expand upon each service.

**Sheltering** – Shelters often become a focal point for the interaction between disaster survivors and the community at large. They are a place of safety, refuge and comfort for many. When a family or individual walks through the door of a shelter operated or supported by the Red Cross, they can expect food, a safe place to sleep, mental health support and access to some basic first aid and health care.

The Red Cross works closely with government and community partners to initiate sheltering activities in schools, churches or other large facilities for individuals and families. Shelters may be opened in anticipation of a disaster, during an evacuation or post disaster. Shelters are not closed until the disaster-caused housing needs of all of the occupants are met.

We coordinate all of our shelter operations with our government partners using a database called the American Red Cross National Shelter System. We are committed to the important work of moving people out of the shelter environment and into transitional and long term housing. This is where our communities truly depend on the collaboration and partnerships with Federal, state and local government. In Pennsylvania, we were challenged by housing shortages in our northern counties and worked closely with our partners making sure that shelter clients' housing needs were met.

**Feeding** – In addition to feeding people at shelters, the Red Cross also provides food in affected areas for people who cannot travel to a shelter, for those who choose to stay in their homes or for those cleaning up after a storm. Emergency workers or other groups helping in disaster relief efforts are provided meals, as well. Mobile feeding is critical to meeting the immediate needs of affected communities. Red Cross workers often drive through affected neighborhoods delivering meals, snacks and beverages to people returning to and cleaning up damaged homes.

**Distribution of Supplies** – In many disasters, essential items clients need to assist their recovery might not be immediately available in the local area. In such cases, the Red Cross distributes throughout the affected areas items that may be needed. During Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee the Red Cross distributed truckloads of clean up kits, rakes, shovels, garbage bags, disinfectant, gloves, masks, insect repellent, sunscreen, personal toiletries items and ready to eat meals. In Pennsylvania, we engaged partner agencies such as the Boy Scouts and our corporate partners to work at our warehouse assembling hundreds of coolers packed with shelf stable food, recovery supplies and information which were distributed to families across the affected areas.

**Disaster Mental Health Services** – Red Cross workers provide vital mental health services helping people cope with the after effects of a disaster. Our mental health workers are present at shelters, feeding sites and aid stations. They also travel with caseworkers and visit families in disaster affected neighborhoods where clean up and rebuilding is taking place. Red Cross mental health volunteers are licensed mental health professionals and often work with practitioners in the community to provide services where the need is greatest. In Pennsylvania, our mental health workers were embedded throughout our response, working on feeding trucks,

with caseworkers, and with partner agencies. They were there listening to the stories of everyone in the community affected by the disaster. They helped families begin their recovery process with valuable information and guided them to seek further help if needed. In addition to our mental health volunteers, the Red Cross encourages all of our workers to take our Psychological First Aid Course so that more of our volunteers are prepared to help clients and each other in times of extreme stress.

**Client Casework** – Disaster victims often need the type of one-on-one advocacy that caseworkers can provide. Few things are more rewarding than working with a family to help the family begin their recovery after a disaster. Each family has unique needs that skilled Red Cross caseworkers can help to address, and caseworkers provide referrals to community resources and agencies as necessary. Because of the sheer number of agencies involved in a successful response, it is often hard to know where to get help and how to start on the road to recovery. Caseworkers advocate on behalf of the client to access the needed resources. They provide a caring heart and a listening ear.

**Outreach to People With Disabilities** - In developing mass care and sheltering capacity throughout the community, the American Red Cross is making it a priority nationwide to ensure that services and shelters are as accessible as possible to people with disabilities. Our Red Cross chapters work closely with local experts on access and functional needs issues. We strive to staff shelters with workers who have the knowledge and experience to evaluate the needs of clients and to make the adjustments and accommodations to ensure a safe and comfortable stay.

### **Red Cross Volunteers and Partnerships**

Red Cross disaster responses are primarily led and delivered by volunteers. In addition to local volunteers who respond to an average of 200 disasters a day nationwide, a network of more than 70,000 trained volunteers is available to respond to larger events. The American Red Cross also has the capacity to manage large numbers of spontaneous volunteers (more than 230,000 volunteers participated in the 2005 response to hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma). In addition, key partners such as Southern Baptist Disaster Relief provide an enormous resource for helping those in need. Other key partners like the NAACP, National Disability Rights Network (NRDN) and faith organizations further extend service capabilities. Our model for disaster services is collaborative; it takes the entire community to deliver an effective response in a large-scale event.

### **Red Cross Response in Pennsylvania**

The Red Cross response to Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee in Pennsylvania was immediate and comprehensive. Shelters were opened and staffed across the area in anticipation of the need. Mobile feeding was established as soon as weather permitted and it was safe to do so. Within days, we secured donated warehouse space at the Humbolt Industrial Park in Hazleton. The Red Cross opened a combination operation headquarters, mobile feeding kitchen, staffing center, and storage facility for bulk supplies.

From this site, we were able to deploy 98 Emergency Response Vehicles with food and relief supplies ranging from Susquehanna and Bradford counties to affected areas south of Harrisburg and across the central area of the state. Over the length of these storms, the Red

Cross provided a safe place to stay for over 8,000 people in 100 shelters, and served over 400,000 meals and snacks.

Our response efforts were driven by volunteers--many of whom came from across the country--to help provide a wide range of services. These services included more than 4,525 mental and disaster health consultations from volunteers who listened and helped families move forward in their recovery. In total, the Red Cross had 1,870 workers on the ground, 1,734 of which were volunteers.

We are working closer than ever with our colleagues in the nonprofit, charitable and faith-based communities to expand our reach. We continue to focus on our coordination with Federal, state and local officials. Here in Pennsylvania, the partnership we have built with State and County Emergency Management is strong. From responding to single family fires to a major hurricane response, we strive to keep our Emergency Management Partners well informed and cooperate and collaborate to better serve disaster survivors.

### **Government, Nonprofit and Other Partner Collaboration**

In Pennsylvania, as is the case across the country, the American Red Cross staffs the state and local Emergency Operation Center(s) (EOC) with Red Cross Government Liaisons who collaborate with government and nonprofit agency counterparts. The Red Cross also actively works with the local Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), which is a coalition of independent voluntary agencies that meet regularly to ensure a coordinated community response that addresses the needs of victims and minimizes redundancies of services.

To ensure effective disaster readiness and response, the Red Cross has established relationships with partner community agencies. We have partnerships with national-level agencies and organizations as well as local agencies and organizations.

In Pennsylvania, through a community partnership with the Southern Baptist Convention, we were able to set up two mobile kitchens units capable of preparing 20,000 meals a day to distribute meals and snacks throughout the Commonwealth.

Several partner organizations supported the massive Red Cross relief effort in the state. County mental health agencies throughout Pennsylvania deployed volunteers to assist at Red Cross emergency aid stations. The American Humane Association set up shelters for animals so that people forced to leave their homes had somewhere to take their family pets. Mennonite Disaster Services helped people clean out their homes. The Teamsters helped with transporting supplies. Countless local businesses and organizations donated over \$400,000 worth of in-kind supplies and materials to help with the response effort. It was through this collaborative effort that we were able to help those in need.

### **Key Lessons Learned**

After reviewing our response in Pennsylvania, several themes emerged.

- There is a continuous need to recruit, develop and train local volunteers. This reduces response time and operating costs, and it creates teams of volunteers that are already familiar with one another prior to the disaster.

- We must continue to aggressively provide preparedness information ahead of events to those communities in the path of the storm. When storms are bearing down on our homes, we know from experience that our communities will listen. The opportunity--albeit brief--is there to ensure everyone has the information and resources they need in advance. When families are prepared, lives are saved.
- Consistent, ongoing, statewide planning and collaboration is critical to a successful response. Over the past few years, the numbers of agencies, community expectations, and resource challenges have increased dramatically. The complexities and interdependencies with all levels of government have never been greater, and our success in coordinating responses is directly related to how well we staff Emergency Operations Centers and federal agencies.
- Strengthening partnerships with other agencies and businesses remains a key factor to our success going forward. If a client needs a cot or a meal, it is of no consequence to the client who provides it.
- Shelters provide important social hubs, but we need to focus on transitioning shelter residents to longer term housing solutions more quickly. The faster that sheltering operations can transition to more permanent solutions, the sooner that residents--including vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, and those with disabilities--can return to normal activities and move towards recovery.
- Partnering remains critical to a successful response, as no one agency can meet the needs of the community in a major event. Government, NGOs, the faith community, advocacy groups, the private sector, and the individual citizen each play a critical role in the response. We must continue to build these partnerships at all levels.
- Responses that cover a wide geography, as was the case with Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee, test our ability to scale and to identify key leadership. As you know, we had significant sheltering and response activity from North Carolina to Maine. Moving forward, we will continue to focus on maintaining resource levels and on growing leadership within our Disaster Services volunteer system so that we can deliver the needed services regardless of the geographic scope of an operation.

## **Closing Remarks**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you once again for this opportunity to provide testimony. The American Red Cross is committed to being ready for whatever disaster may strike. Hurricane Irene and Tropical storm Lee were storms that tested our communities, but I am pleased that the American Red Cross and our volunteers and partners could play a role in the successful response. To mount an effective response, entire communities need to work together, and we need to be sure that we are ready to do our part.

I am happy to address any questions you may have.