



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 16, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW, Room 8 SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

We write today regarding concerns with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce as the Agency responds to COVID-19. As you know, FEMA is in the midst of responding to the largest disaster in the Agency's history, as it is the first time every state in the country has a major disaster declaration simultaneously.¹ Unfortunately, while the current public health emergency is rightly FEMA's top priority, other natural disasters are still on the horizon, with experts predicting a significant spring flooding season and an active hurricane season.^{2,3}

FEMA has long struggled with workforce issues that have hampered the effectiveness of the Federal response to disasters. In December 2018, FEMA's force strength, defined as "the actual number of personnel in FEMA's incident workforce cadres who have completed the administrative requirements for deployment," was 12,592.⁴ This was 1,909 above FEMA's force strength of 10,683 in August 2017, but still below its target of 13,004 for FY 2018.⁵ Additionally, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the Agency has faced "challenges in training employees and maintaining staffing levels across four concurrent disasters," which is especially concerning as FEMA will still be responding to COVID-19 when

¹ Maxouris, Christina and Dankin Andone. "The United States is reporting 20,000 coronavirus deaths, more than any other country." CNN. April 11, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/11/health/us-coronavirus-updates-saturday/index.html>.

² Cappucci, Matthew. "One-third of the Lower 48 faces risk of flooding this spring, Weather Service says." The Washington Post. March 19, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/03/19/spring-flood-outlook-nws/>.

³ Belles, Jonathan and Brian Donegan. "2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season Expected to Be More Active Than Normal, Colorado State University Outlook Says." The Weather Channel. April 02, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/2020-04-01-2020-atlantic-hurricane-season-april-outlook>.

⁴ Vinik, Danny. "FEMA's Staffing Lags Well Behind its Post-Puerto Rico Goals." Politico. December 26, 2018. Accessed February 25, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/26/fema-staffing-puerto-rico-1074809>

⁵ Federal Emergency Management Agency. "2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report." July 12, 2018. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/15336432621956d1398339449ca85942538a1249d2ae9/2017FEMAHurricaneAARv20180730.pdf>.

future disasters strike.⁶ This concern is already playing out, with tornadoes and major storms that will likely require Federal assistance hitting South Carolina, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Georgia in recent days.⁷

To be clear, we appreciate FEMA’s workforce and all they continue to do to help communities before, during, and after disasters. FEMA employees should feel confident that their leadership has a plan to ensure that they are not spread too thinly to effectively respond to disasters. As such, we ask that you expeditiously answer the following questions:

1. What is FEMA’s current force strength and structure?
2. How many FEMA staff are dedicated to the COVID-19 response? How many have been deployed to states around the country in response to COVID-19 and other disasters?
3. How many total reservists does FEMA currently have? How many reservists have been deployed to respond to COVID-19 and other open disasters?
4. Does FEMA plan to use its surge capacity force (SCF) to help it respond to COVID-19?
5. What is FEMA’s plan for having to staff multiple concurrent disasters to ensure the Agency can effectively respond to each? Please provide any relevant documents or analysis FEMA has prepared regarding staffing plans for COVID-19 and future disasters.
6. Does FEMA have enough personal protective equipment to provide for FEMA staff deployed for COVID-19, or other disasters where they might come into contact with the public? Should social distancing guidance continue into hurricane season, how is FEMA ensuring that any deployed staff can do their job while keeping a safe distance from other individuals?

Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



DONALD M. PAYNE, JR.
Chairman
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness,
Response, and Recovery



CEDRIC L. RICHMOND
Member of Congress

⁶ GAO-18-472, p. 89. According to GAO, FEMA “expanded its Surge Capacity Force program to include not only volunteers from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), but all federal employees” and “had enrolled over 12,000 employees” by January 2018, “compared to 4,033 in 2015.”

⁷ Almasy, Steve and Holly Yan. “Storms and tornadoes leave behind battered homes and at least 32 victims in the South before lashing East Coast.” CNN. April 14, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/13/weather/weather-tornadoes-storms-monday/index.html>.



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