May 28, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW, Room 8 SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

As our country continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat posed by natural disasters is on the rise. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plays a critical role in preparing for and responding to both natural disasters and the ongoing pandemic, raising concerns about the agency’s ability to respond to multiple disasters simultaneously. We write to urge you to ensure FEMA is ready to respond to natural disasters as it responds to COVID-19, request a briefing on FEMA’s efforts in this regard, and offer our support during this critical time.

Already this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has classified two severe weather events as “billion-dollar weather and climate disasters,” a term NOAA applies to weather and climate disasters causing at least $1 billion in damages.1 This month saw the first two named storms of 2020, even before the official start of the Atlantic hurricane season.2 Warmer sea surface temperatures in the tropical Atlantic raise concerns that the hurricane season could bring above-normal activity. Indeed, NOAA’s recent hurricane season outlook projected a 60 percent likelihood of an above-normal season, with a 70 percent chance of 13 to 19 named storms, 6 to 10 of which could become hurricanes, 3 to 6 of which could become major hurricanes. NOAA projections suggest at least 128 million people in the U.S. are living in areas with an elevated flooding risk this spring season, “with 28 million at risk for moderate or greater flooding, and 1.2 million at risk for major flooding.”3 Meanwhile, the National

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Interagency Fire Center outlook report raises concerns that lower than average snowpacks and slightly intensified drought risks could have implications for increased wildfires.4

Given these projections, we are concerned about FEMA’s capacity to manage natural disaster preparedness and response efforts during the ongoing pandemic. In a May 3, 2020, interview, you acknowledged the challenge COVID poses, saying “[t]his pandemic, it is historic, it is unprecedented in many ways for FEMA.”5 Even before the pandemic, in a June 12, 2019, hearing before the Committee, you recognized your agency’s longstanding staffing limitations saying, “It has been a struggle for FEMA to make sure that we have enough disaster responders in reserve, we are probably short a few thousand employees when it comes to reserve.”6 Multiple audits by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the agency experienced problems training staff for disasters and ensuring deployed staff had the skills and abilities to effectively perform their duties, and that FEMA needed to improve its use of both pre- and post-disaster contracts.7 Clearly, FEMA has struggled to respond to multiple large-scale disasters contemporaneously, such as during the 2017 hurricane season.8

Going forward, FEMA needs to take a proactive role in procuring the staffing and resources necessary to respond, keeping in mind that conventional disaster response strategies, such as communal shelters and volunteer recovery and supply distribution efforts, could pose increased health and safety risks during the pandemic, particularly for underserved populations.9 We look forward to engaging with you

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on these issues. To that end, we request that FEMA brief the Committee on the “COVID-19 Pandemic Operational Guidance for the 2020 Hurricane Season” and on FEMA’s plans for responding to natural disasters during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the upcoming hurricane season.10

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security

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SHEILA JACKSON LEE
Member of Congress

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JAMES R. LANGEVIN
Member of Congress

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CEDRIC RICHMOND
Member of Congress

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DONALD PAYNE
Member of Congress

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KATHLEEN RICE
Member of Congress

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LOU CORREA
Member of Congress

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XOCHITL TORRES SMALL
Member of Congress


MAX ROSE  
Member of Congress

ELISSA SLOTKIN  
Member of Congress

AL GREEN  
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DINA TITUS  
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NANETTE DIAZ BARRAGAN  
Member of Congress

LAUREN UNDERWOOD  
Member of Congress

EMANUEL CLEAVER  
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YVETTE CLARKE  
Member of Congress

BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN  
Member of Congress

VAL DEMINGS  
Member of Congress