

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr.

Field Hearing: “A Prepared Community is a Resilient Community”

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications

Monday, July 11, 2016, at 9:30 a.m.

Last week, national tragedies filled the headlines. My heart is heavy for the families of those who were killed in Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights, and Dallas. Although these tragedies happened far away from here, our communities are not immune to this kind of heartbreak.

I hope that when we return to Washington this week – with only 5 legislative days remaining before a 7 week recess - the House will do something meaningful about law enforcement relationships with diverse communities. I also hope it will do something about the irrational access to military-style firearms that killed five brave police officers Thursday night. Our country can be better than this.

Turning to the focus of today’s field hearing, nearly four years ago, Superstorm Sandy pummeled this region, destroying homes and communities and causing tens of billions of dollars in damage. Our region is not accustomed to responding to and recovering from storms of that magnitude – and our population density coupled with significant infrastructure damage certainly complicated the process.

I am proud of the hard work and compassion demonstrated by our local emergency responders in the days and weeks following the storm. I wish I could say the same for the government of my home state of New Jersey.

In the years that followed the disaster, allegations surfaced that the Governor played politics with disaster relief money, and to this day, people complain that the State has been slow to distribute disaster funds to those who need it.

As of April, approximately \$1 billion in Federal funds had yet to be obligated. In the wake of the storm, people in low-income communities were hit hardest and ultimately struggled most to find affordable housing in the months that followed.

These recovery challenges were exacerbated by the fact that many in low-income populations were not in a position to advocate for themselves to access the resources necessary to recover and become more resilient.

Today, we are in the midst of hurricane season, and I am wondering what would be different if a storm like Sandy hit us. Does the Federal government have better measures in place to ensure that State governments administer Federal programs supported quickly and effectively-- and do not play politics with disaster relief?

Are low-income communities able to incorporate hazard mitigation and resilience activities into their disaster recovery efforts as more affluent communities? And if not, what are we doing about it? Finally, what have we learned about how to best leverage the capabilities of charities and non-profit organizations in disaster response?

I look forward to the witnesses’ testimony today and thoughts on what Congress can do to help make communities more resilient.