



**HOMELAND SECURITY
COMMITTEE**

**Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Dan Donovan (R-NY)
Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communication Subcommittee**

*Field Hearing: A Prepared Community is a Resilient Community
July 11, 2016*

Remarks as Prepared

Thank you all for taking the time to appear today before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, and thank you to Staten Island University Hospital for hosting us in this beautiful facility.

Nearly four years ago, a perfect confluence of circumstances brought Superstorm Sandy and its devastating storm surge to our doorstep. Dozens of New Yorkers lost their lives, thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed, and billions of dollars have been spent in the aftermath.

Oftentimes after a disaster like this, the public just wants to see action – something, anything being done to Fix It. Under the gun, Congress drafts legislation to allocate massive sums to federal agencies and to impacted jurisdictions, usually with limited oversight.

Resources are, of course necessary, to recover and defend against future disasters. But have the investments made after Superstorm Sandy resulted in a stronger, more resilient New York? And just as importantly, have the federal agencies worked together to maximize their individual investments? What can we improve?

That's what we're here to talk about today. My opening statement will discuss the rationale for federal investments in storm resiliency projects, and then highlight a few examples of government working well and areas for improvement. I look forward to hearing each agency delve into some more specifics about their resiliency focus, and how we can improve upon the status quo.

First, it's a fact that one dollar spent today to mitigate flood risk will save many dollars after a disaster strikes. The federal government's focus on risk mitigation – particularly the concentrated focus after Sandy – will save lives and money in the future. It's a missed opportunity to replace in-kind homes and infrastructure after a disaster, only to leave them just as vulnerable to destruction during future disasters. That's why it's encouraging to see agencies like HUD place such a strong emphasis on resiliency projects.

But the investments should have a cohesive strategy. And not just HUD investments working together with other HUD investments, or Army Corps projects tying into other Army Corps projects.

Where possible, HUD projects should complement FEMA projects, and USDA projects should complement Army Corps projects, and so on.

For example, it seems strange that differing FEMA and Army Corps standards would result in no changes to flood insurance maps or premiums after the Army Corps completes a project designed to reduce flood risk. Yet, that has actually happened in some cases.

The response has not just been federal, the City of New York has also devoted tremendous resources to Sandy Recovery and has transformed the way it approaches disaster preparation and recovery over the past four years.

Here at home, the City of New York has acted aggressively to advocate for federal risk mitigation grants, coordinate investments and projects, and work toward a City less susceptible to storms like Sandy.

The Mayor's Office of Recovery and Resiliency, led by Dan Zarrilli, has an entire team dedicated to this cause. In general, an empowered office coordinating the different work happening in the City will minimize missed opportunities, save time, and maximize efficiencies. It's good to see New York City operate this way.

We can find a great example of the benefits of collaboration right here on Staten Island. The Army Corps of Engineers is planning and designing a \$600 million line of protection stretching from Ft. Wadsworth to Oakwood along Staten Island's east shore.

There have been obstacles and setbacks, but through each challenge the Mayor's Office, the Corps, and the National Park Service – which has jurisdiction over some of the land the Corps will use – have worked collaboratively and productively to overcome them.

My team, along with Senator Chuck Schumer's office and Borough President James Oddo's office, is on the phone almost every week with the involved agencies to track progress and schedules.

While the Corps is not here today, this subcommittee will continue to remain focused on the status of that project.

To ensure that it remains on time, on budget and that it will deliver the expected results to the residents of Staten Island.

Despite the great partnerships, agency turf battles still seem unavoidable, and that's disappointing. The Corps and the USDA have been squabbling over easements, which has jeopardized a \$32-million investment in Staten Island's "Bluebelt," a natural drainage system crucial to the borough's sustainability.

Oddly, each agency wants the same exact outcome – a flood drainage easement. I understand differences of opinion will arise across agencies, but collaboration must trump retrenchment – it's what the public expects and more importantly deserves.

We must also address the post-disaster housing recovery strategies to effectively mitigate risk. After spending upwards of \$4.6 billion, New York City neighborhoods will be left with a hodgepodge of housing types.

A single block could see a handful of elevated and rebuilt structures, a few empty lots, and the rest repaired in-kind. Is that the best possible outcome?

We must consider the question in the context of New York City's unique housing stock. Mitigation standards that work for single-family detached homes in the south don't work for multi-family attached structures here.

In fact, federal one-size-fits-all floodplain building regulations actually prohibit repairing attached homes that suffered the most damage. Floodplain regulations require homes that suffered substantial damage to elevate during repairs, but attached homes cannot be elevated. Owners of attached homes are stuck in this bureaucratic morass, unable to legally repair their structures and unsure of options aside from elevation that could reduce their flood risk. Urban areas like New York require detailed alternative mitigation options with commensurate flood insurance premium credits.

While inflexible federal standards may impede urban post-disaster housing mitigation, New York City has benefited from creative new ventures like FEMA's 428 alternative process and HUD's resiliency competitions. I'm sure we'll hear more about the successes of these programs from the agencies here today. In particular, I'm interested to hear FEMA's assessment of the Rapid Repairs program, which restored heat, hot water, and electricity to 20,000 residential structures in 90 days.

Last but not least, we will hear from representatives of charitable organizations and Southside Hospital. These organizations worked tirelessly to assist the residents in their communities after the storm and each of them experienced their own challenges in those efforts.

Non-profits are often the most effective responders because they have deep local relationships and understand the needs of their friends and neighbors. My friend Vinny Ignizio, who leads Catholic Charities here on Staten Island today but was a Council Member during and after Sandy, has a unique perspective on how government and non-profits can improve their coordination in response to disasters. I am sure Ms. Higgs will also have a unique perspective on this issue.

Hospitals are among the most important critical infrastructure during and after a major disaster. SIUH, where we are right now, is in the 100-year floodplain, as is Southside, which faced extreme flooding during Sandy.

Three federal agencies – FEMA, HUD, and the VA – have made substantial resiliency investments in New York Hospitals and I'm interested in hearing how the agencies have coordinated their investments to make them work together to maximize their utility. In particular I am also interested in hearing from South Side Hospital in regard to their experiences working with FEMA since the storm.

As the Subcommittee meets today, we are at the start of another hurricane season, and whether it is this year or in the years to come, another disaster will strike New York City. Four years after Sandy and the appropriation of more than \$50.5 billion for the regional recovery effort, are we more prepared for that eventuality?

This hearing will point us in the right direction. Now is the time to address any inadequate statutes, resolve any interagency turf battles and build the relationships to ensure that we are a resilient community in the face of the next disaster.

Before I yield to the Ranking Member for his opening statement, I want you all to know that when I was appointed Chairman of this Subcommittee, I said that we wouldn't be holding hearings just for the sake of holding hearings. After each hearing we've held this year, we've taken action on the information provided by our witnesses – whether it was successfully advocating for the restoration of homeland security grants

that are vital to New York City and major urban areas around the country or introducing legislation to address cybersecurity challenges.

Today's hearing will be no different. Many of the issues I will raise today have been informed by my constituents. And I can assure you that we will work to consider and take action on the things we learn from today's hearing.

With that, I welcome our distinguished witnesses and yield back the balance of my time.

###