

## Modernizing FEMA: What to Preserve, What to Fix, What to Build

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### Opening

Good afternoon. I'm Mary Jo Flynn-Nevins, Chief of Emergency Services for Sacramento County and the Government Affairs Chair for the International Association of Emergency Managers USA Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm here to share a perspective from the field—where disasters are not abstract policy debates but lived realities. FEMA is the backbone of our national emergency management system, and the decisions made here will shape how well we respond to the next crisis. I'd like to highlight for you five (5) areas to address:

1. FEMA's Role in Executive Leadership
2. What must be preserved
3. Fixing what's broken
4. The hidden crisis of lacking local capacity
5. Innovation and accountability needs

### 1. FEMA's Role in Executive Leadership

FEMA must be elevated within the federal structure. Its role as the nation's emergency management coordinator is too critical to be buried within the Department of Homeland Security. In national crises, FEMA needs direct access to the President and the authority to act swiftly—not filtered through layers of bureaucracy that delay decisions

and fragment coordination. The current structure limits FEMA's ability to hold federal agencies accountable when they fail to lead in areas under their jurisdiction. While FEMA can issue mission assignments and fund agency actions through the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), it lacks the directive authority to compel timely execution or waive procedural barriers. That authority should be explicit—FEMA must be empowered to coordinate and direct federal response efforts without relying solely on financial leverage or presidential intervention. This is not just a matter of efficiency; it's a matter of saving lives and protecting property when every second counts.

## **2. What Must Be Preserved**

FEMA's core missions are non-negotiable. Four areas must be preserved.

### **First, Standards and Training**

These are the foundations of mutual aid systems like EMAC. Without them, we lose interoperability. FEMA sets the tone and guides systems down to local jurisdictions through the provision of guidance, frameworks, and training. Without FEMA's planning frameworks, local and state agencies would lack a common playbook, leading to fragmented and inefficient responses.

Standards and training anchor FEMA's role as national coordinator. These aren't just technical documents; they are instruments of federal leadership and legitimacy that are relied upon at the local level to influence budgets and policies in favor of a more prepared jurisdiction and nation.

### **Second, Logistics and Prepositioning**

FEMA's ability to warehouse and move supplies—generators, food, and shelter materials—is unmatched. FEMA maintains regional distribution centers that can rapidly deploy resources to disaster zones and can orchestrate the transportation of federal assets

across agencies and jurisdictions, ensuring timely delivery and avoiding duplication and delay. It is crucial to keep the ground and air movement coordination on behalf of the federal government.

### Third, Federal Coordination, Alert and Warning, and Continuity of Government

FEMA ensures that agencies like HUD and HHS fulfill their obligations during disasters. The continued streamlining of coordination is what local governments need to expedite recovery. FEMA's role in maintaining the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is paramount. It is the central, authoritative system that disseminates critical, life-saving information to the American public. Further, FEMA is charged with maintaining the federal government's COOP/COG capabilities. They must continue to do so.

### Fourth, USAR and IMAT Fill a Vital Role

These teams are essential for responding to catastrophic events and serve as a symbol of federal readiness, providing reassurance to communities that help is on the way when local resources are overwhelmed. Both USAR and IMATs provide speed and expertise and are trained for rapid deployment and high-stakes coordination. They are among the few FEMA assets specifically designed for worst-case scenarios.

## 3. Fixing What's Broken

Today, the interpretation and application of FEMA policies can vary dramatically from one region to another. FEMA must operate consistently across all regions.

Inconsistencies delay recovery and confuse survivors. We need clear, uniform policies and simplified procedures. Doing so would eliminate ambiguity, reduce regional disparities, and ensure that every jurisdiction—regardless of geography—receives the

same level of clarity, support, and accountability. In a national system, there should be no room for interpretation when lives and livelihoods are on the line.

Grant reform is also essential. Block grants must include required pass-throughs to local jurisdictions. These pass-throughs must be incorporated into preparedness grants and recovery.

And FEMA must restore support for preparedness programs like CERT and the Youth Council, which build future capacity and resilience. These programs were terminated without warning, and their absence is being felt on the ground. These programs help to train and inspire future emergency managers, ensuring a workforce pipeline – while instilling a nationwide culture of preparedness.

#### **4. The Hidden Crisis of Lacking Local Capacity**

Let me speak plainly: the greatest threat to disaster recovery today isn't a lack of policy—it's a lack of capacity. A recent study by Argonne National Labs on emergency management capacity revealed widespread under-resourcing. FEMA's role in producing and sharing this knowledge is not optional—it is foundational to national resilience and security. Local agencies need funding, staffing, and national standards to justify investment.

A further example of capacity need is that communities are still trying to close out disasters from years ago, delayed by complex FEMA processes and too few staff. That delay isn't just frustrating—it's financially dangerous. Jurisdictions remain exposed to audits and clawbacks long after the disaster ends. Without targeted support from FEMA to build local capacity, we'll continue to see missed deadlines, wasted dollars, and growing risk in communities that can least afford it.

From delayed project execution to missed mitigation opportunities, the lack of capacity is a root cause of systemic failures. Even the best federal reforms will fail if there's no

one on the local end to implement them. In capacity building, local jurisdictions must be required to adequately resource their EMAs. The Council and Congress need to consider all appropriate actions to make this mandatory.

If we want to fix the national disaster management landscape, we must invest in local emergency management. That means:

1. Funding for staffing, training, and certification.
2. A national directive requiring every jurisdiction to maintain a funded emergency management function.
3. Investment in doctrine, guidance, and research.

## **5. Innovation and Accountability**

There are three areas where we believe new policies or programs could make a difference.

First, we need and support an independent investigation arm like NTSB and an after-action reporting system.

Too many of my colleagues have been scapegoated, while no clear standardized investigation mechanism remains available. Disasters are complex, and accountability should not be political. A neutral, third-party body—modeled after the National Transportation Safety Board—would provide after-action analysis, identify systemic failures, and recommend improvements. This would create a feedback loop to improve FEMA’s own standards, training, and coordination.

For disasters that don’t meet the significance of requiring a review board, we still need to consider a requirement for after-action reports and reimbursement for this in the disaster closeout process to ensure meaningful reports are completed and disseminated transparently. Consideration should be given to re-instituting the Lessons Learned

Information System (LLIS), a repository for AARs and best practices from around the nation.

**Second, modernize Insurance and Mitigation Integration.**

We need to align insurance and mitigation. We need to reward communities that invest in resilience. We also need to explore new insurance models like parametric and catastrophic insurance.

**Third, Ensure Digital Access in Disaster Assistance**

We must remember what disasters truly are: the failure of one or more lifeline systems—communications, power, transportation, and increasingly, broadband and internet connectivity. Innovation must expand access, not narrow it. FEMA’s digital tools must not exclude those without broadband. We recognize digital tools can improve efficiency. FEMA’s shift toward requiring email for disaster assistance applications risks excluding rural, elderly, and low-income populations. Ensuring digital access must be a core design principle, not an afterthought. Innovation should expand access, not narrow it.

**Closing**

FEMA’s mission is too important to be weakened. We must preserve what works, fix what’s broken, and build what’s missing. That includes building capacity where it matters most—at the local level.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to strengthening our nation’s emergency management system.