



**Testimony of Larry Gispert**  
**Past President**  
**International Association of Emergency Managers (USA)**  
**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency**  
**Management**  
**Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
*U.S. Mayors Speak Out: Addressing Disasters in Cities.*  
**March 4, 2010**

Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart and members of the subcommittee, we appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

I am Larry Gispert, the Director of Emergency Management for Hillsborough County Florida. Hillsborough County is on the West Coast of Florida and has the City of Tampa as its county seat. The county's population is approximately 1.2 million. I am a past President of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) and am testifying on behalf of the USA Council of IAEM (IAEM-USA). I have 29 years experience in emergency management with 16 as the Hillsborough County Director and have also served as President of the Florida Emergency Preparedness Association.

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IAEM-USA is our nation's largest association of emergency management professionals, with almost 5,000 members including emergency managers at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector. Most of our members are city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks. Our membership includes emergency managers from large urban areas as well as rural areas.

We appreciate this Committee's strong support for emergency managers and your recognition of the importance of the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) in building capacity at the state and local level. In particular we commend your efforts to strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agency and your insistence on the implementation of the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act.

Since Hurricane Katrina a number of organizations and experts have examined the need for changes in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief Act, as amended, and in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regulations and policies. These organizations and experts have included the National Advisory Council and FEMA itself, in addition to this most recent effort by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Opinions of these organizations and experts have differed about what needs to be changed and the level of funding required. However, it is clear that all of these voices are in unanimous agreement about the need to make sure we encourage our local communities to prepare and assist them to recover as rapidly as possible.

IAEM-USA would like to commend the U.S. Council of Mayors for the amount of work they have put into this task force and their suggestions which will encourage additional discussion.

We would like to comment on a few of the issues raised in the report.

One of the key issues of this report is a request for a catastrophic disaster designation. While IAEM-USA does not have an officially adopted position on this issue, we would encourage very careful consideration of any request to change laws and policies. It would be helpful for planners to know exactly what resources would be available and what cost shares would be waived in the case of a catastrophe. However, we believe that it is very difficult to define a true catastrophe. To some a definition of catastrophe would be devastation impacting one community or county while for others it would require a major effect on the nation. Our experience tells us that the real difference between a catastrophe and a disaster lies, in fact, in the *social impacts* associated with the event. IAEM-USA believes caution is in order when considering modification to laws, policies and authorities. I would urge caution in making statutory changes which enhance the role of the federal government (including the military) at the expense of the authority and responsibility of state and local governments even in what some would describe as "catastrophic" events.

However, if Congress does decide to define a catastrophic trigger and have additional resources available, IAEM-USA believes those provisions should be contained within the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief Act, as amended, and not in a separate piece of legislation.

We agree with the U.S. Conference of Mayors' recommendation to consolidate all Stafford Act related laws and amendments into one statute and that the implementing regulations of those statutes be codified in one place.

The Community Disaster Loan Program (CDL) can assist communities with lost revenue as the result of a disaster to meet operating costs. Currently, this program is capped at \$5 million. We believe this cap is insufficient, but we do not have a specific suggestion on the amount of increase.

We believe that FEMA needs a strong case management program as a part of its toolkit to respond to the disaster-related needs of those impacted by the event. It is our understanding that FEMA is currently conducting an extensive pilot, reviewing lessons learned, and that they intend to develop a program.

The disaster declaration process needs to be quick and deliberate. Nothing can impede a coordinated disaster recovery so much as an overly long consideration as to whether the event is a disaster or not. While we don't recommend eliminating the provisions to protect this funding against fraud and waste, we do believe that the process should be as streamlined as possible. The recommendation of the Administrator of FEMA of a declaration of disaster should not be impeded by endless review prior to consideration by the President.

All communities would like to shorten the time from declaration to receiving funding for projects. We would urge consideration of the Cost Estimating Program for repairing, restoring, reconstructing, or replacing a public facility or eligible private nonprofit facility which was authorized in the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. (P.L. 106-390).

The issue of making private for profit entities eligible for Stafford Act disaster assistance raises a concern with us. We, as emergency managers, rely on our colleagues in private enterprise to protect their losses through insurance and other preparedness activities like Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP). Should our private partners not do this, we as emergency managers, will not be able to focus public resources where they are the most needed. We are concerned that if businesses become eligible for assistance under the Stafford Act, this will actually create *disincentives* for insurance and preparedness. Most emergencies at the local level do not rise to the level of a disaster declaration under the Stafford Act. So, if businesses are not prepared for a Stafford Act disaster, then they are not prepared for lesser level events. In addition, we would urge caution. Allowing one private for profit entity to become eligible would create a "slippery slope." Then the major question confronting Congress and FEMA would be where to stop.

In addition to the work by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, we would also like to make a few comments on HR 3377, the Disaster Response, Recovery, and Mitigation Enhancement Act of 2009 which was ordered reported by this committee. We urge reauthorization of the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program as included in your bill. The current situation of one year authorizations is not good for the program. We are strong supporters and admirers of the work of National Urban Search and Rescue teams. They are a vital resource and we are aware that the Committee has addressed concerns raised by the teams. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact has been an effective system for providing trained state and local resources to affected jurisdictions and we support the authorization of grants to administer it. The State of Florida sent more than 6,200 personnel to assist Mississippi in their recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Most of those personnel came from Florida county and city governments. We were pleased to provide this assistance, and we know they stand ready to return our favor.

Any discussion of disaster recovery also must include preparedness. Preparedness in the United States rests primarily on the foundation of a strong emergency management system at the state and local level. However, many local governments are finding maintaining an independent emergency management agency to be difficult and they are assigning these duties to other agencies that are already overburdened with existing responsibilities. Emergency management is not a part time job regardless of the size of the community. Every community needs a professional emergency manager constantly planning, training, exercising and thinking how to deploy whatever resources are available or how to integrate help from other jurisdictions if needed. When this responsibility is relegated to another agency, planning suffers from lack of attention. The emergency management system will only work if all four levels of government—city, county, state, and Federal are capable of quickly applying the resources necessary to resolve the issues. If any one of these vital links in the chain is weak or broken, the community's response and recovery will be severely impacted. We must work to make sure all our partners at the local level have strong programs or are covered by strong programs.

In Florida, we say, "The first 72 is on you," because we know one of our responsibilities as local government is to make sure that our citizens are prepared for emergencies and disasters. The preparedness of communities is based on the preparedness of individuals. This is, perhaps, the weakest link in our preparedness effort. We believe, in most cases, the majority of people can take care of themselves and their families – perhaps even their neighbors – for the first 72 hours or three days after a disaster – if they plan. That planning is what allows those with the statutory responsibility for coordinating local mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts – emergency managers – to focus on those who have greater needs or are not able to provide for themselves when their support networks are disrupted during a disaster.

It is also vital that all levels of government provide information to citizens to allow them to understand what actions are reasonable to expect from their authorities in a disaster. In the absence of reasonable information, unreasonable expectations are formed and post-disaster frustrations rise. Regardless of the economic downturn, local citizens expect local government to

continue to respond to all emergencies and disasters. It is well known that it takes people and money to properly respond to such events.

Outside of the strictly catastrophic setting, it continues to remain important for State and local governments to have a stake – some “skin in the game” – in terms of their own funding to prepare for, respond to, mitigate, and recover from local disasters. This has the additional benefit of making all of members of the team responsible for jointly setting recovery priorities as well as minimizing fraud, waste and abuse of these funds.

Again, we appreciate this Committees’ support for strong emergency management, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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