



# **CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY**

**STATEMENT BY**

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**BEFORE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY  
HOUSE HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**IMPROVING THE FEDERAL RESPONSE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATE  
OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

**MARCH 13, 2019**

Chairman Payne, Ranking Member King, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Steve Reaves and I am the President of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Local 4060, which represents over 3,000 federal and District of Columbia permanent full-time employees. In the aftermath of the most active disaster season in recent history, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on FEMA's emergency management and preparedness. Today I will talk about three workforce issues that if improved would strengthen FEMA's ability to carry out its emergency management and preparedness responsibilities: recruitment, hiring and retention.

FEMA employees work to make victims whole again after natural and human-created disasters. We are first responders, but we stay on the ground, sometimes for months or years, to ensure that the Americans affected by natural and human-made disasters can return to normalcy and rebuild their lives. We are the urban search and rescue officers who search for survivors and non-survivors in burning cars and flooded homes. We are the safety officers who ensure downed power lines do not electrocute survivors and toxins in flood waters do not infect communities. FEMA firefighters and police officers work hand in hand with state and local emergency management agencies to ensure crime is mitigated and fires do not harm survivors. We are the claims adjusters who work to make victims whole after their homes have been destroyed. We are the logisticians who compile data and predict when and where future disasters will occur. We are the grant and contract officers who ensure needs are met in the aftermath of destruction.

The last five years have been historically active for FEMA's disaster response. Our members responded to hundreds of disasters, including the recent tornadoes in Alabama; Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas; Hurricane Irma off the coast of Florida; Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico; Hurricane Michael, Tropical Cyclones in the Pacific Northwest in Sai Pan, historic wildfires in California; the eruption of the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii; and flooding in Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Maryland.

I came to FEMA as a 23-year Army veteran because of FEMA's mission to reduce the loss of life and property and protect our institutions from all hazards. I was deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia. In the Army, I learned a lot about the importance of maintaining high morale and team building and I brought those lessons with me to FEMA. Both are essential to maximize performance and are particularly critical in times of crisis. I, and most of my colleagues, agree that FEMA's mission is too important to let the agency go without the resources needed to serve, help and protect the American public. Now, allow me to address the top three workplace obstacles to improving emergency management and preparedness I mentioned: (1) recruitment (2) hiring and (3) retention.

To improve emergency management and preparedness we must improve how FEMA recruits qualified candidates. Candidates for employment wait too long to receive a security clearance for employment at FEMA. This backlog of security clearances is a significant obstacle when trying to recruit qualified candidates.

For example, FEMA struggles to recruit firefighters and police officers at Mount Weather Emergency Operations Center in Bluemont, Virginia because of the delayed security clearance process and is understaffed and currently has a deficit of firefighters and police officers. Their schedules are erratic, and their leave requests are denied because of the low staffing levels. The Mount Weather Emergency Operations Center is used as a major relocation site for the highest

level of civilian and military officials in case of national disaster. Firefighters and police officers are wary to apply because they know their security clearance process is so lengthy.

If more permanent full-time security background investigators were hired to process security clearances at FEMA, more firefighters and police officers could be onboarded at Mount Weather and elsewhere. If FEMA hired more qualified and experienced permanent full-time employees, the agency would be better able to recruit the workers needed.

FEMA employees are hired through a rigorous, competitive, merit-based examination process that includes application of veteran's preference. The number of permanent full-time employees needed to carry out successful emergency management and preparedness cannot be short changed. Our employees are over-worked, under resourced, under staffed, and frequently deployed to disaster zones without adequate recuperation time. Permanent full-time employees are outnumbered at FEMA by non-permanent employees. In 1988 the Stafford Act created two sets of non-permanent employees to be hired during disasters: these include (1) Cadre of On-Call Recovery/Response Employees (CORE) and (2) Disaster Response Workers (DRW) Temporary Workers. CORE and DRW employees are brought on using an expedited hiring process during disasters. For purposes of this testimony I will refer to CORE and DRW employees as Stafford Act employees.

Stafford Act employees are used to supplement permanent employees, which too often results in vacancies for permanent full-time positions going unfilled for extensive periods of time. The agency keeps Stafford Act employees on for much longer than their two to four year contracts. Stafford Act employees should be deployed to disaster zones for a specified amount of time to respond to a specific disaster. These positions were not designed to work with or replace permanent full-time employees on non-disaster work; however, because there is such a need for permanent full-time employees at FEMA, it is not uncommon for Stafford Act employees to work outside of their job descriptions.

Additional funding and resources are needed for more permanent full-time staff. Identifying permanent full-time vacancies would help improve FEMA emergency management and preparedness and would allow FEMA to hire the number of permanent full-time staff that is truly needed. A "desk audit" is needed to accurately calculate the number of permanent full-time current employees and determine where additional permanent full-time employees are needed to address emergency management and preparedness.

Some Stafford Act employees have been working at FEMA for much longer than their designated employment period. Some have worked longer than 10 years in Stafford Act positions. The agency continues to transfer their contracts to new disasters without giving them a permanent full-time position. There are discrepancies with regard to the agency's count of the number of permanent full-time employees that FEMA needs. Stafford Act employees are, in effect, permanently filling vacant permanent positions. Stafford Act employees are filling vacant permanent positions without the benefits and rights of Title 5 permanent full-time employees. Permanent full-time employees need to be hired for these vacancies. These employees have on-the-job experience and should be afforded the opportunity to apply for permanent positions when they become available. FEMA must hire more permanent full-time employees who are emergency management, safety, and program management professionals hired for their skills and expertise.

An accounting of the number of Stafford Act employees who have worked at FEMA for an extended long-term period is also needed. Positions where Stafford Act employees have been employed for a long time should be made into permanent full-time positions.

FEMA is unable to keep in-house talent at the agency. Stafford Act employees do not have full union rights and protections which help improve workplace safety, labor management relations and communication in the workplace. When Stafford Act employees experience issues in the workplace, they often feel as though they have little to no rights. Title 5 permanent full-time employees do have these workplace rights and protections and work with the union to help them ensure that they have what is needed for them to successfully fulfill their job duties with dignity and respect. The union cannot represent most Stafford Act employees when they experience workplace discrimination and harassment.

FEMA should create a path toward permanent full-time employment for Stafford Act employees, so that all agency employees have workplace rights and ensure that FEMA is more disaster ready.

To improve emergency management and preparedness more permanent full-time employees must be hired. Robust funding is needed to address the ongoing recruitment and retention issues. Too much is at stake for American families across the nation to allow anything less.

This concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.