



TRIBAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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Statement of Jake Heflin
Tribal Emergency Management Association (iTEMA)
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing on "When Catastrophe Strikes: Responses to Natural Disasters in
Indian Country"
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Chairman Tester, Vice Chairman Barrasso and Members of the Committee, my name is Jake Heflin, I am the President and Chief Executive Officer for the Tribal Emergency Management Association, also known as iTEMA. I am an enrolled Citizen of the Wah Zha Zhi Nation (Osage Nation) out of Oklahoma. I am from the Tzi-Zho Wah-Shtah-Keh Clan. I was given the name Tah-Wah Gka-Keh "Town Maker".

On behalf of iTEMA, I want to thank for you holding a hearing on "When Catastrophe Strikes: Responses to Natural Disasters in Indian Country."

With over 23 years of experience in emergency services, I have served as a Firefighter, Paramedic, Field Supervisor, Field Training Officer, Paramedic Preceptor and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program Manager. I currently work for the City of Long Beach Fire Department in California.

iTEMA is a national tribal organization comprised of volunteers that focus on Tribal Emergency Management and Emergency Services. The mission of iTEMA is to promote a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against all hazards that impact our Tribal communities.

As an emergency responder and emergency management instructor that works with Tribal governments throughout Indian Country, it has become evident that there is a significant disparity between the state of readiness for Tribal communities versus that of local, county, and State government. It boils down to capacity, capability, and funding.

With an increasing number of challenging and escalating incidents impacting Indian Country, it is apparent that a solution is necessary to address this disparity. Identifying ways for impacted Tribes to request assistance from other Tribes and/or other federal and Tribal emergency management experts like iTEMA during an emergency incident is critical. Immediate emergency operational assistance, whether it is simply to provide support over the phone or

actually deploy resources, is, for the most part, an unmet need for Indian Country. Tribes are left to fend for themselves, with minimal assistance and cooperation from local and State agencies. These reoccurring events led to the creation of iTEMA.

iTEMA strives to provide technical assistance that supports Tribes as they prepare and consider critical information for declaring a State of Emergency, tracking costs associated with the event, managing resources and the corresponding documentation that supports requests for reimbursement should the event meet the thresholds for a Presidential Declaration.

iTEMA also provides training opportunities by way of our annual conference and we offer specific classes targeted at increasing emergency capacity and capabilities. iTEMA assists in development of Tribal CERT programs and developing comprehensive plans that help Tribal communities take proactive steps to minimize and mitigate loss associated with future events. Efforts are currently underway by iTEMA, individual Tribes, and other partners such as the State of California Office of Emergency Services to develop Tribal Incident Management Teams to further provide additional resources for Tribal communities.

When a catastrophe strikes, the Federal response to natural disasters in Indian Country is slow, tedious and in significant need of a comprehensive overhaul. Coordinated planning and preparedness activities initiated by Tribes and the Federal Government are important. These initiatives lessen the impacts of disasters in Indian Country. However, more support is needed. The United States Federal government has taken some small steps to enhance the outreach and opportunities to support these initiatives, but lacks the operational coordination when working with Tribes on real events. For example, despite providing pre-disaster support, technical assistance and planning before a disaster strikes, at the time of the incident, FEMA steps away from Tribes until monetary thresholds are met by the disaster. Even when FEMA responds to a disaster, FEMA does not support the Tribes operationally.

Currently, the systems that are in place to support Indian Country during disasters rely heavily on the Federal government to provide All Hazards Emergency Response Operations (A-HERO) support during events that impact Tribes. Often, this assistance from the Federal government is provided by part-time or on call staffing that have no specific experience relating to the emergency needs of Tribal communities.

Tribes are uniquely different. As sovereigns, Tribes have a responsibility to provide for the public safety of their citizens. However, when Tribes are overwhelmed by a disaster, the Federal Government has a trust responsibility to support Tribes and provide the appropriate assistance.

The current National Response Framework does not adequately identify a primary Federal lead for disasters in Indian Country. However, iTEMA believes that the response model for Indian

Country needs to include FEMA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, other Federal Partners and non-governmental organizations like iTEMA for increased support and involvement.

During disasters, first responders play a pivotal role in a Tribe's ability to manage the incident. In the areas of Tribal Structural Fire and Tribal Emergency Medical Services, there is minimal federal engagement to support these programs. Wildland Fire responsibilities in Indian Country already exist under the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Thus, iTEMA proposes bringing these additional emergency services together under the Bureau of Indian Affairs Emergency Management division to create a comprehensive all-hazard, all-risk approach to managing response throughout Indian Country.

iTEMA believes that as an association, with a focus on Tribal emergency response, we should be utilized and provided with the opportunity to support the Bureau of Indian Affairs and FEMA, through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding to support our direct participation in response. The Tribes would see a marked change in the level of experience and awareness that these responders bring to Tribal communities in need of support and assistance.

iTEMA recommends that Federal funding be set aside to further support the continued development and maintenance of a Tribal Emergency Mutual Aid Compact (TEMAC). Just as the National Emergency Management Association receives funding to support the State to State mutual aid (EMAC), iTEMA believes we are well positioned to manage this effort on behalf of Indian Country. This process will support Tribes in a more effective manner and streamline the process for Tribes to receive outside support from other Tribes and Tribal organizations.

Given the specific complexities associated with emergency response in Indian Country, iTEMA believes that there should be a specific Tribal Emergency Support Function (ESF) within the National Response Framework (NRF). ESF's provide structure for coordinating Federal interagency support as it relates to how the Federal government responds to an incident. A Tribal ESF would further enhance the visibility of Tribes at the Federal level with regard to response. The Tribal Assistance Coordination Group (TAC-G) is an example of a successful strategy to increase communications with Tribes and other Federal partners.

Additional work must be done to meet the needs of Tribal communities. The development of Tribal CERT, Tribal Fire and EMS programs and Tribal Emergency Management programs should be supported nationally through direct funding to the Tribes. This program must be funded to meet the current demand and opened to all Tribes that show a need and can articulate a plan for developing these services.

The Tribal Coordination Support Annex, part of the National Response Framework, should be released immediately. This annex has already been created but remains tangled in red tape and bureaucracy for unknown reasons.

iTEMA asks that Congressional Research Services investigate the state of Tribal emergency management and emergency services as there is inconsistent information as to the state of readiness in Indian Country. The current capacities and capabilities of Tribal Emergency Services are, for the most part, not really known. An assessment and a clearinghouse for this important information must be established, in order for Tribes to share this important information between agencies and other partners. Indian Country must have better snapshot of our current state of Tribal Emergency Services to better identify the unmet needs that exist.

The strategic, operational, and tactical aspects of Tribal emergencies from the United States Federal Government must be handled by those with the background and experience to do so. Currently, FEMA, at the Headquarters level, chooses to house Tribal Affairs in FEMA Intergovernmental Affairs, part of FEMA External Affairs. Despite recommendations from Indian Country and other Federal government partners, FEMA Headquarters has not realized the importance of placing Tribal All Hazards Emergency Response Operations (A-HERO) within the FEMA Office of Response and Recovery. Even at the FEMA regional level, some FEMA Regional Directors have chosen to move Tribal emergency operations out of External Affairs, into more appropriate places, like the FEMA Regional Preparedness Branch.

The Federal Government plays a pivotal role in Indian Country during emergencies. They have the ability to bring robust capability and supplemental disaster funding to support Tribes. The reality is that within Indian Country, most incidents will never meet the Federal government thresholds and the available Federal support will be minimal. This must change. The thresholds of Presidentially Declared Disasters must be looked at from a Tribal perspective, not a hard number. Tribes are different. Incidents impacting our sacred sites don't carry a monetary value. For us, it's priceless. Our people, our culture, our way of life are our most valuable resources. For Tribes, emergency management is something we have practiced for centuries. However, with a changing climate and escalating technological hazards, Tribes are at increased risk.

I ask today, that Congress fund the Federal Government to establish a baseline for Tribal emergency response and recovery. I ask that the Federal government look to their Tribal partners to find solutions that empower Indian Country to be self-reliant. This requires funding and an overhaul of the current system. Emergency Management funding must be provided directly to Tribes. Access to these funds is necessary in order to support the development of Tribal capacity and capability. To minimize loss, we must take a proactive approach when dealing with natural catastrophes. We must focus on preparedness and mitigation to reduce the loss associated with response and recovery.

iTEMA is an organization that was created to support Tribes during disasters. It was built on the premise of “Tribes helping Tribes”. iTEMA is committed to working with the Federal government to develop and implement these solutions.

In conclusion, I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to speak today and look forward to working together to promote and enhance emergency management, response, and recovery throughout Indian Country.

Thank you and I am open to any questions you may have.