

Thank you, Madam Chairman, and welcome to you Secretary Chertoff. I appreciate your coming before the Committee today to discuss the future of FEMA and our ideas about how to reinvigorate the agency so that in the future it can respond successfully to catastrophes the size and scope of Hurricane Katrina.

I know you know that many of us are also extremely disappointed by the consistently declining level of funding for homeland security grants that this Administration supports and the way it has chosen to disburse it. Last week's announcement of the Fiscal Year 2006 allocations was received with dismay, and in my opinion, for very good reason. I'll have more to say on that point in a moment.

Last month, this Committee issued an extensive analysis of what went wrong during the preparations for and response to Hurricane Katrina. You are familiar with our findings and also with the recommendation contained within that report to rebuild FEMA into a more muscular, accountable agency within the Department of Homeland Security. I am pleased you believe that FEMA should remain within the Department, as the Chairman and I do. And I hope that you will come to agree with our other reorganization proposals, which would pull together the resources, the missions, and the authority for an effective federal catastrophic preparedness and response when local and state agencies are overwhelmed.

Our driving motivation for rebuilding and reinventing FEMA is to save lives and to help those who survive disasters rebuild their lives. Over 1,500 people lost their lives as a result of Hurricane Katrina – a devastating number when we consider that no other storm in the last 30 years has caused as many as 100 deaths. But this one brought about the deaths of 1500 people. Tens of thousands were left without basic necessities for days in conditions that shocked all Americans. The fact is that still today, months after the storm and at the start of yet another hurricane season, hundreds of thousands displaced by Katrina and Rita still face uncertain futures. We can and must do better together.

As you know, I have been critical of the lack of leadership at the federal, state and local level, in the immediate run up to and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Active and decisive leadership is the single most important factor in saving lives during catastrophes. Appropriate government structures are a distant second.

But appropriate government structures have their place. When we created the Department of Homeland Security four years ago as the primary department for protecting Americans here at home, emergency management was supposed to be at the new Department's heart. Just as the Hart-Rudman Commission had recommended, we put FEMA at the core of the Department where it could draw on the Department's other components for strength, capability and competence, especially in the face of a catastrophic terrorist attack or natural disaster.

Unfortunately, the Administration and Congress undermined that vision by depriving the agency of funds and qualified leaders. Secretary Ridge and you further dismantled what was left of FEMA's preparedness functions, placing them elsewhere in the Department. I believe this was a mistake. That's why Senator Collins and I have proposed to reunite preparedness with response so that the same officials who help states and locals get ready for disasters are the ones who also help them respond.

As we will hear from our witnesses today, FEMA must remain within the Department of Homeland Security, in part, so it can take full advantage of the many DHS resources available - including Coast Guard responders, communications capabilities and

interoperability research, law enforcement assets, infrastructure protection, and intelligence about the types of attacks that are most likely to occur and for which we should prepare. At a time when the threat of terrorism and future catastrophes loom, now is not the time to begin dismantling the Department of Homeland Security that was created to make our nation safer.

We think FEMA should be less Washington-centric and more connected to the real work of preparing for disasters where they actually occur, so we envision a rebuilt agency with ten strengthened regional offices to focus on preparedness and response coordination with local and state agencies. Each regional office would house a permanent “strike team” that would include representatives from other federal agencies involved in emergency response to ensure the Feds are familiar with regional threats and with state and local emergency personnel.

Our rebuilt FEMA would be designed to deliver the kind of rapid, energetic, and life-saving response exhibited by the U.S. Coast Guard during and after Hurricane Katrina. The Coast Guard is part of DHS and has a role defined by statute, which is just what we propose for our bigger, better FEMA. Finally, we would require the new agency’s top leaders to have the experience, professional qualifications, and relevant technical training that will enable them to call the right shots when catastrophes happen.

Mr. Secretary, a brief word about homeland security grants to states. This Administration and this Congress continue to underfund one of the most crucial needs of this nation – the grants that allow state and local first preparers and responders to conduct the extensive planning and get the training and equipment they need to do their jobs. For the second year in a row, this funding has declined, and the Administration has proposed significant additional cuts for next year as well. Yet the risks to our communities, whether by natural disaster or terrorist attack, have not diminished. We must invest more in our defenses here at home if we are to have any chance of thwarting another September 11 or of responding effectively to the next Katrina. Even if we get the right organization within DHS, it will matter little if the Administration continues to underfund our most critical homeland security needs.

I want to welcome our witnesses today, and I look forward to their counsel and advice. The tragedy that was Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent federal response seems to me evidence enough that we cannot go back to the past. If we are to be prepared for the threats of the future, we must give those who prepare for and respond to disasters the tools they need – and that means money, leadership, and authority. That is how to save people’s lives when catastrophe strikes. Thank you, Madam Chairman.