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Testimony on

***Ensuring Strong FEMA Regional Offices:
An Examination of Resources and Responsibilities***

Before

**House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness
and Response**

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TESTIMONY OF

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Mr. Chairman and Members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today before this Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response of the House Committee on Homeland Security. My name is Christine Gibbs Springer. I am the Director of the Executive Masters Degree Program in Crisis and Emergency Management at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas's Department of Public Administration, as well as a Fellow at National Academy of Public Administration (the National Academy). As a National Academy Fellow, I was one of seven members of an Academy Panel that released a report in October 2009, *FEMA's Integration of Preparedness and Development of Robust Regional Offices: An Independent Assessment*. The focus of today's hearing, "Ensuring Strong FEMA Regional Offices: An Examination of Resources and Responsibilities," goes to the heart of the Panel's study.

As background, the National Academy was asked by Congress to conduct an independent assessment of FEMA's implementation of two key mandates within PKEMRA [Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006]: preparedness integration and the development of robust regional offices. At its most fundamental

level, the goal of PKEMRA is to build a more resilient nation by improving America's preparedness. In order to play its leadership role within the nation's preparedness system, FEMA must not only integrate preparedness across all of its component programs, but also establish an effective division of responsibilities between headquarters and the regional offices to reach all stakeholders to ensure we are a nation prepared.

Over the course of our assessment, Academy staff conducted over 70 interviews with FEMA officials at headquarters and the regions, as well as with other interested parties. We conducted site visits to three of FEMA's ten regional offices [I, III, VI] and surveyed senior management in the regional offices. In addition, we facilitated a focus group session with FEMA's Regional Administrators and hosted an online dialogue with state-level stakeholders. As a member of the Academy's Study Panel, I am here today to share with you the highlights of what we found and the challenges we believe FEMA still faces.

During the past decade, our nation has faced significant natural and man-made disasters. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, PKEMRA mandated significant changes within FEMA to improve our national preparedness and with it our national response capability. The recent catastrophic seismic events in Haiti, Chile, Taiwan, and Turkey should remind us both that preparedness is critically important and that every disaster is experienced locally. While most daily emergency management situations are managed by local actors, FEMA plays a critical role in assisting stakeholders at all levels through training and education, exercises, and capacity building grants. FEMA's regional offices are responsible for nurturing and maintaining the critical relationships with

stakeholders upon which preparedness is based. PKEMRA directed FEMA to develop “robust regional offices” to carry out this critical role.

Before discussing our findings, I would like to note that Panel members and staff were consistently impressed by the commitment and dedication of FEMA officials and staff, as well as their strong desire to make FEMA the premier national emergency management agency. During our interviews with headquarter and regional officials and in our survey of regional offices, we frequently encountered a candor and a willingness to identify problems and barriers to success while also offering concrete suggestions and ideas to address challenges and resolve issues. We also learned of frustrations when headquarters does not provide the regional offices with a genuine opportunity for input into critical management and policy decisions.

Based on a review of FEMA’s actions to implement PKEMRA, the Panel concluded that FEMA has taken significant steps to integrate preparedness and develop more robust regional offices. We believe that these efforts—undertaken by both the previous and the current administrations—should be recognized and applauded. Despite this progress, we identified several key challenges at the time of our review:

- Preparedness is not yet fully integrated across FEMA;
- Regional offices do not yet have the capacity required to ensure the nation is fully prepared;
- Stakeholders are not yet full partners with FEMA in national preparedness;

- FEMA has ineffective internal business practices, particularly with regard to human capital planning and management.

To address these concerns, the Panel issued a total of seven recommendations. Among other things, the Panel recommended that FEMA work with internal and external stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of preparedness integration, establish needed outcome metrics and standards, and monitor progress on an ongoing and transparent basis. From an organizational standpoint, FEMA needs to eliminate silos and other impediments to the full integration of preparedness.

As FEMA itself has acknowledged, regional offices are the agency's front line in supporting stakeholders throughout the country. Recognizing the critical importance of the regional offices, the Panel recommended that FEMA continue building their capacity consistent with Administrator Fugate's summer 2009 policy memorandum delegating additional responsibilities to the regions. Equally important, FEMA should develop a framework to evaluate how successful it is in building robust regional offices, while continuing to assess whether additional authorities should be delegated to the field. Based on effective practices elsewhere in the federal government, the Panel provided FEMA with key principles to use in strengthening the headquarters-regional office relationship.

FEMA can make most, if not all, of these needed changes. Our study found that senior FEMA regional officials recognize the urgent need to integrate preparedness, rebuild their capacity, improve their headquarters relationship, and more actively engaging stakeholders at all levels. In our April 2009 survey of senior FEMA regional

managers, three-quarters reported that their region had made at least some progress in preparedness integration—yet almost 85% felt it would take at least one more year to achieve. Three-quarters of the survey respondents reported increased relationships with states, but fewer reported increased interaction with such stakeholders as private industry and tribes. Most strikingly, over 90% of the respondents reported that considerable or moderate changes would be required for their regional office to become fully robust.

Clearly, much remains to be done. FEMA regional managers identified actions to improve FEMA’s efforts in national preparedness. These included:

- Establish a vision for preparedness integration and increase commitment to their goal;
- Make programmatic and administrative changes to FEMA’s grant programs including reducing the administrative burdens placed upon grantees (such as multiple reporting requirements, and grant applications);
- Engage and better serve the needs of stakeholders;
- Coordinate common goals within all FEMA divisions or Directorates to reduce HQ program stove-piping;
- Continue to empower the regions through increased staffing and authorities, as appropriate;
- Continuously improve the relationship between the regions and headquarters by recognizing and utilizing the knowledge and experience that exists within the regions; and

- Continue to expand available funding and consider potential structural changes within the regions to more effectively meet regional needs.

Many have asked: “What is a robust regional office?” Although PKEMRA did not define this term, the Panel believes that fully robust regional offices must have sufficient capacity to support efforts of stakeholders at the state, local, and tribal levels; an optimally sized workforce with the requisite skills to implement headquarters policies and guidance; a strong working relationships with headquarters components and a commitment to emergency management goals; and strong, effective working relationships with stakeholders at all levels.

As I close, let me turn my comments specifically to stakeholders. While many regional officials reported that some stakeholder relationships are improving, we also noted that much remained to be done to actively engage stakeholders at all levels. As mentioned above, FEMA’s regional offices are the critical point of interface with the non-federal stakeholders who have primary responsibility for emergency management including preparedness. FEMA must continue to build and expand these relationships, empowering the regions to actively engage stakeholders and holding these offices accountable for doing so.

FEMA has made significant progress in achieving PKEMRA’s mandate for preparedness integration and robust regional offices, but it faces continuing challenges in certain areas. It must build upon progress to date to fully integrate preparedness, to strengthen the capacity of the regional offices, establish working partnerships with

stakeholders, and improve internal business practices that support mission-related programs. FEMA has the opportunity to develop a shared vision for national preparedness that actively engages and empowers partners, stakeholders, and citizens.

Again, thank you for inviting the National Academy of Public Administration to testify on this important issue. We stand ready to answer any additional questions you may have.