

Opening Statement (as prepared)
Chairman Henry Cuellar (D-TX)

Hearing on “Preparedness: State of Citizen and Community Preparedness”
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response
Committee on Homeland Security
October 1, 2009, 10:00 a.m.
311 Cannon House Office Building

We are especially pleased to have with us for the first time FEMA’s new Deputy Administrator for National Preparedness, Tim Manning.

Mr. Manning comes to FEMA with an impressive background in homeland security, having most recently served as New Mexico’s Director of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

I would like to congratulate you, Mr. Manning, on your confirmation as Deputy Administrator. This subcommittee looks forward to working with you to strengthen FEMA and prepare the Nation for any type of disaster.

I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Mr. Bill Jenkins, Director of Homeland Security and Justice at the Government Accountability Office.

Traveling the furthest to join us this morning is Ms. Wendy Smith, Assistant City Manager for McAllen, Texas. Thank you, Ms. Smith, for taking the time to come to Washington to discuss steps the City of McAllen has taken to promote community preparedness.

I also want to welcome Ms. Suzanne DeFrancis, Chief Public Affairs Officer for the American Red Cross. Thank you for being here this morning.

Today’s hearing kicks-off a series of hearings this subcommittee will conduct on national preparedness.

Our focus this morning is on the state of citizen and community preparedness. We want to better understand FEMA’s initiatives for promoting individual readiness.

A recent FEMA survey reveals that we have a long way to go in preparing individuals for an emergency. While slightly more than half of survey respondents have set aside supplies in case of a disaster, only 44 percent reported having an emergency household plan. Just 38 percent reported a familiarity with their local sources of public safety information.

Most concerning is that despite FEMA’s best efforts to boost community preparedness since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, citizen awareness on the importance of preparing is virtually unchanged from two years ago.

We must close these gaps.

I recognize that it is not FEMA’s job alone to do so. Emergency preparedness is a shared responsibility and we all must do our part to make sure we’re ready when disaster strikes. But FEMA must develop a clearer vision for how it intends to enhance the role of the public as the “first-line” of disaster preparedness and response.

FEMA runs a couple of programs that focus on individual readiness. The first is the Citizen Corps program, which is a Bush administration initiative designed to foster volunteer activities that make communities better prepared to respond to any emergency.

The second is the Ready Campaign. Ready is a public service initiative geared toward educating and empowering Americans to become prepared for a disaster.

GAO has been evaluating both Citizen Corps and Ready for this subcommittee since last year. I am concerned that GAO's preliminary review suggests that FEMA does not have a strategic plan or performance measurements for Citizen Corps. GAO has also been unable to determine who exactly at FEMA is in charge of the READY campaign and how READY is integrated into other citizen preparedness programs.

I am eager to learn from Mr. Manning if he agrees with GAO's observations and—more importantly—what his plans are for Citizen Corps and Ready, as well as individual preparedness more generally.

We can't talk individual preparedness without having our communities at the table. I look forward to getting Ms. Smith and Ms. DeFrancis' perspective on the steps their organizations have taken to foster citizen preparedness. I would also like to hear from them what they think FEMA's role should be in promoting individual preparedness.

So with that, let me again thank our witnesses for their participation in today's hearing. I look forward to hearing your testimony and working with you to ensure FEMA has a clear vision for strengthening citizen and community preparedness for all disasters.