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Subcommittee HRG: ECPR - 10/1/2009 - "Preparedness: State of
Citizen and Community Preparedness"

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to speak to you today about community preparedness, particularly with regard to the Citizen Corps program and its affiliates.

My name is Wendy L. Smith, and I serve as an Assistant City Manager and Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator in McAllen, Texas, a border community of 130,000, located in a Council of Governments service area of 1.2 million residents.

McAllen has an active CERT team which is one of seven Citizen Corps affiliate programs in our three county region. Annually we train almost 50 new volunteers in three classes. The objective of the Citizen Corps program is to have better trained – and therefore safer – volunteers to assist their neighbors, co-workers and churches in case of emergency. We are fortunate in our community, as in yours, to have individuals who are willing to help those who cannot help themselves during natural or man-made disasters. Whether it be flooding, wildfires, tornadoes, or earthquakes, we are lucky to have citizen volunteers who heed the call to service. Though well-intentioned, these volunteers are frequently untrained, and therefore may actually hinder the efforts of our first responders. Emergency services may be diverted to provide impromptu training for these spontaneous volunteers. This scenario is the reason that programs such as Citizen Corps are vitally important community preparedness tools.

The Citizen Corps website states that the CERT program seeks to double the number of participants over the next two years, with over 400,000 individuals completing the training. FEMA should be commended for this ambitious goal. Regionally we strive to have a total of 500 trained CERT volunteers to deploy wherever they are needed at any given time. In our jurisdiction we have waiting lists for CERT participants and a shortage of trainers from the various local governments. All of the participating local governments provide in-kind the cost of trainers, facilities, equipment and administrative coordination of the classes. Seven Citizen Corps teams and their affiliates in our region are supported by a federal grant of less than \$20,000.

While I would like to come here today asking for more funding for Citizen Corps programs across the nation, as a government employee I realize that resources are finite. As such, I submit this recommended change utilizing existing funding. Remove categorical funding restrictions within the grant (for promotional items, equipment and training). For example, McAllen no longer has a need to promote the CERT team, as there is a waiting list of volunteers. However, 15% of the grant is allocated to promotional and educational materials. That funding is better utilized for equipment and training, such as CPR classes not currently offered, and is enough to allow the City to train an additional team. This added flexibility helps us move toward our common goal of training and retaining volunteers.

Citizen Corps cultivates and sustains the spirit of volunteerism that has long been a source of pride in our communities. While these volunteers are not intended to replace first responders, they provide immediate assistance when traditional emergency services cannot meet the demand. Your support of the Citizen Corps program is greatly appreciated by local governments such as ours that continually work to prepare our residents to help themselves and each other during disasters. Thank you for your time and attention today. I am happy to answer any questions.

FOLLOW-UP ADDRESS:

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Summary: The attached remarks support the Citizen Corps program and its affiliates. A recommendation is made to provide flexibility within the grant to maximize certain funding categories using existing resources.