

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Ranking Member Jamie Raskin

Opening Statement

“Oversight of the Federal Emergency Management Agency”

November 19, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Comer, and thanks to Administrator Criswell for being with us.

As of last month, more than 300 Americans had lost their lives to this year’s brutal hurricane season. Millions of people across the Southeast have had their lives uprooted, their families displaced and their homes and communities ravaged by Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

Friends of my family were forced from their home in Asheville, North Carolina and came to stay with us in Maryland for several weeks following the nightmare, and we closely tracked the recovery effort, which has been unceasing and heroic.

FEMA is America’s lifeline in disasters like these, coordinating rapid response and recovery efforts with state and local first responders and rescue agencies. In the recent hurricanes, FEMA deployed swiftly, providing survivors with temporary shelter, debris removal, and other emergency measures, including \$750 for Serious Needs Assistance for individuals to obtain essential items like food, water, baby formula, and medication.

FEMA’s disaster work is not conducted by a single force of full-time federal government employees but rather a dynamic team of emergency responders and agencies drawn from across the country, which includes federal, state and local workers, full-time and part-time employees and private contractors.

Two of my own constituents, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service Captains Josh Kurland and Dave Hutchinson, went south with rescue teams to help communities hit by Hurricane Helene. FEMA’s workers, from around the country, help their fellow Americans get back on their feet after a natural disaster.

Even in the heat of the presidential election, FEMA’s response won high praise from leaders across the spectrum. Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin said, “I’m incredibly appreciative of the rapid response and the cooperation from the federal team at FEMA.” Florida Governor DeSantis said, “everything we’ve asked for from President Biden, he has approved...” And our Florida colleague Congresswoman Luna said, “As I am seeing, FEMA has been very helpful, and I’ve been in direct communication with them. And they’re absolutely going to assist, because President Biden has told them to do so.”

So we could be here today celebrating the work force of 22,000 FEMA workers, but instead the Majority wants to focus on one so-called “intermittent” employee in Florida whose team encountered what she called “political hostility” while canvassing door-to-door for FEMA in Florida. Thereupon, as I understand it, she made the

judgment that her workers were unsafe and issued the order to her team not to go to any more houses in that neighborhood where there were Trump signs planted in the yard.

This was a clear mistake legally and constitutionally—which violated the core mission of FEMA and every federal agency to work on behalf of all Americans. It is plainly wrong and terribly divisive to use a presidential campaign lawn sign alone as a proxy for dangerousness.

The director of FEMA properly fired the employee within 36 hours of learning of the incident because this action was an egregious departure from the norms of nonpartisanship which must govern the conduct and work of the federal workforce. Federal workers have a duty to serve all Americans, regardless of their political beliefs.

FEMA’s prompt and unequivocal personnel action in this case is powerful evidence that the civil service system is working, not only to deliver quality public service but also to correct employee errors and ensure that the people whose homes were skipped received outreach and assistance.

This is not to deny for a moment that, in recent months, FEMA aid workers have been forced to work under a cloud of propaganda and lies concocted to erode public trust in FEMA. Because of this disinformation, many victims of the hurricanes have rejected federal assistance and others have even harassed and threatened FEMA workers. As Republican Congressman Chuck Edwards, who represents the hard-hit Asheville, North Carolina said, all the misinformation has been, “not just unhelpful, it’s been harmful.”

I agree with my Republican colleagues and Administrator Criswell: Federal agencies must serve all Americans and that requires a federal workforce of nonpartisan professionals hired based on their competence and their merit.

What’s true of FEMA canvassers is, of course, true of the rest of the government. We need government for the people—all the people, regardless of political viewpoint. President-Elect Trump has promised to be a President “for all Americans.” I hope he delivers on that promise. And if he falls short of it, I trust all of my colleagues will hold him to it.

In his first Administration, President Trump all too often deliberately directed disaster aid based on the party politics of local leadership and past electoral performance, not the needs of the community and disaster survivors.

In 2017, the Trump Administration denied 99% of the aid that North Carolina’s Democratic Governor requested as part of cleanup efforts following Hurricane Matthew. Also in 2017, after Hurricane Maria, President Trump blocked the full release of emergency assistance to Puerto Rico that was appropriated by Congress due to an unfounded belief that the destruction and death toll had somehow been inflated to make him look bad. In 2018, after California suffered the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state’s history, President Trump initially refused to approve disaster aid because of the state’s liberal Democratic leanings. He reportedly only later changed his mind after staff provided him data showing that there were more Trump voters in Orange County, California, than there were in the entire state of Iowa.

Now is the right time for all of us to agree that no one in public office, no matter how high nor how low, should play partisan politics with disaster relief.

Thanks Chairman Comer for convening today’s hearing so we can stand together and reaffirm our commitment to the idea that our government exists to serve all of our citizens and to commend the devoted federal workers who work day in and day out to serve us all.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

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