

Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Administrator Hamilton's Remarks at the National Emergency Management Association 2025 Mid-Year Forum

Release Date: Mar 24, 2025

Thank you very much.

Well, good morning, all. It's a tremendous honor of mine to be here, here at the NEMA conference. And I just want to thank you again for your warm hospitality and for all the amazing friends and partners.

That being said, being here at NEMA.... NEMA is one of our strongest partners that you could possibly ask for. And so for me, it's the honor of a lifetime to be able to come and speak and specifically give guidance and feedback about what we're doing at FEMA and what the federal government approach is to emergency management.

I would like to convey my gratitude for all of you and your generous time and effort in receiving me here in this room.

I am, in fact, a former Navy SEAL, a former combat medic, a former public servant. But I'm also a father, I'm a husband and I have family that have personally been devastated by many different significant events of the past.

It is an honor to advocate for disaster survivors, emergency managers, and the interests of the American people. I believe deeply in the mission of Emergency Management, which is, at its core, rooted in what I believe to be servant leadership. And you all embody that here. So, thank you.

Over the past months, I've had the opportunity to travel all throughout this great nation – places like the great state of Kentucky (and) Florida.



Kevin, thank you again for your hospitality. We were just there literally a few days ago, West Virginia yesterday and the day before that.

I also want to thank Senator Justice for his warm hospitality and other great individuals we met with there. We've also gone to North Carolina seeing the devastation that's impacted that state. Again, that's very real to me because I have family that was personally impacted by much of the flooding of western North Carolina.

What I've heard from each of our partners, from our staff, as well as from many of you all in separate and individual conversations, is that we have to bring meaningful reform to federal emergency management. And I'd like to lay out the methods and the approach through which we're going to be engaging in that here today.

Our disaster survivors deserve a federated, interlocked resource network that really can provide everything that they need so that their resources and their requirements can be met.

This presents quite a few challenges, and we'll go through some of those here momentarily.

I see this need as putting survivors ahead of the industry as firsthand, especially as I walk through some of the ruins of the fires of southern and central California. Standing specifically in one of these fires, that reminded me of the time when my own parents had their home lost and completely burnt to the ground in a devastating fire.

It reminds me of friends and loved ones who lost significant amounts of their time, of their loved ones, and of their personal property in the fires that devastated Northern California in 2017.

I grew up a Northern California, boy. I joined the Navy, and it's been the honor of a lifetime to travel throughout the world. But as I travel all throughout the United States, I hope you understand that disasters are very real and personal for me.

During my visit specifically to California, I engaged with a woman who had lost her home. She indicated that the impact it would have on losing her community. Not sure what the future looks like. Not sure whether she'll be able to keep the home



that she raised her children in, whether she had to supplant and find a new community given the devastation and challenges she's facing.

In our conversations, there were a lot of tears and a lot of crying, a lot of hugging. A lot of my opportunity to empathize with her and I, some of her words still resonate with me to this day.

“I need help. Please help me.”

Other survivors have shared stories about insurance coverage. I'm so glad that Kevin's been bringing this forefront, this topic, to the forefront of this conversation, because the fact is, there are insurance challenges. There are responsibility and role challenges as it pertains to emergency management that we have to overcome. There are so many survivors that don't understand the complexity of federal and state programs, and that need assistance and clarity.

I'm reminded of so many individuals who've been impacted, and they each leave a profound, lasting effort and resonance on me. As we know, sometimes it's truly difficult to comprehend the devastation that many families face until you go there and you see it firsthand.

As this season continues. I can tell you that I'll be up to see more disasters. There will be more disasters. There will be more devastation. So that's very real for me. And I intend to ensure that these survivors have my ear and that I listen and engage with them in a way that allows us to be more responsive and keep them in the forefront of our mind as we maneuver our efforts and resources.

I've also had the honor of a lifetime to meet with many different FEMA leaders, employees that are on the ground doing yeoman's work, as well as Congressional leaders, state and local representatives, emergency managers from across this country, and so many more. And yes, I have to give a big shout out to our private sector partners. They are the performance enhancers of what we do within emergency management. And it is a critical balance that we need to have so that we can leverage the best resources in the appropriate times necessary.

Each of them has offered invaluable forms of feedback, especially as we talk about the conversation of what federal emergency management truly entails. And I'm grateful for each of their feedback because their collective knowledge, wisdom,



and experience is far more than I could ever hope to amass in a single lifetime.

So, for me to you all here, thank you for that. As most of you are aware, the President has called for an Assembly to review the status in the future of what is federal emergency management -- more specifically, what is the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The council will be putting forth recommendations for the future of this organization and the future of the federal role within the construct of what we have in this constitutional republic.

From my vantage point, it is imperative that we bring as many voices into that conversation as possible.

Again, because of your invaluable experiences and expertise. We rely upon this heavily so that we can make informed decisions, and the president can feel confident that he has a federal workforce and federal resources to bear that meets his intent and mission, and that, most importantly, delivers to those in need.

I see this as a pivotal moment for the field of emergency management. We have a mandate for reform -- this is true. I don't think this is centric just to FEMA. And with that, it is imperative that we engage in thoughtful, holistic and expedient reform processes.

This starts with introspection. We have to take a hard look at our own selves -- our strengths, as well as our weaknesses.

Again, removing the ego and understanding the gravity of our decisions and the realities of the context in which we operate. FEMA has been at many times serving as a catch-all agency. I think that's opened us up to quite a bit of public scrutiny, and rightfully so.

Is that, in fact, the appropriate balance of what this organization should entail? Or do we need to strengthen our state partnerships to enable a better, more interlocked framework of emergency management?

FEMA has been acting as a "catch all" agency, taking on more and more of work outside our authorities and original intent of Civil Defense and Emergency Management.



This mission creep has confused the public as well. I particularly appreciate the comments made by a lady earlier from Utah about how they apply for assistance. The complexities of floods versus flash flooding -- they're not the same.

There is a federal interagency coordinated stratosphere, if you will, of resources. But navigating that is complex, not always the easiest to understand.

This is the role where FEMA must step in to help assemble that "team of teams," to ensure that while we may not always have the solutions, we bring in the industry of partners who can help provide them because clarity is essential for the future. Clarity and truth are essential for us to be the most effective possible within this respective career field.

We must clarify not only what we can bear, but what the core mission and responsibilities are, so that the public has trust in us again.

I see it that we need to also emphasize transparency in our mission space and the values that we accomplish.

Recently, I requested an agencywide survey, particularly on the reformation of FEMA. 25,000 employees -- we had nearly 50% participation in an agency wide survey, and we intentionally structure to design it so that the senior levels down to the most granular, low-level employee has an opportunity to have a voice and to give influence and to give feedback in what the future of this organization could be, and to provide insight and perspectives in areas where we can improve..

We structured this intentionally and have to give a major shout out to Cynthia on my team for putting that together.

Our team is wholly invested in making FEMA stronger, more agile and faster, to ensure that we are well-equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow -- because there are many challenges facing us tomorrow.

When we think about the future of Emergency Management, there are things that we need your help with in answering key questions.

What, in fact, is the role of an emergency manager in today's escalating framework of disasters?



What is the correct balance between state and federal coordination as we navigate the challenges of today and tomorrow?

How can we better serve those in need, while still meeting the muster of our basic emergency functions?

Addressing these questions will require us to change. Most importantly, we must continually seek to do better, to improve and to be more survivor-centric in all of our efforts and approaches.

Course correction is difficult. It's never easy. But as we embark on this path of reform, we must remember *why* we're implementing these changes. *Why* there must be adaptation to the field of emergency management, and *why* my particular agency must go through a reorganization and a refocus on the core tenets of what we were founded on.

Behind every disaster statistic, we must remind ourselves that there is an individual suffering potentially their worst day ever. And they deserve the absolute best that we all have to offer. Period. Nothing less than that,

We can achieve much of this by focusing on three core objectives and these have been the goals that guide FEMA currently under my leadership: building SLTT capacity; refocusing on survivors; and enhancing our operational readiness

Number one, building our state, local, tribal (and) territorial partnerships, building their capacity and capability.

Number two, refocusing on survivors.

And number three, enhancing our operational readiness to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

An ambitious goal, but nonetheless, we've embarked to do it. And we're already implementing methods and procedures and mechanisms within FEMA to achieve that.

We must build a stronger, more-resilient nation, And first, that starts with each of you. Building on the capacity of you, our state partners, to better serve those in need.



You know the needs of these communities. You live amongst these communities. You serve as their ambassadors.

So, each of you presents a unique perspective along their path of resilience. We need those insights. This is why we want to seek to empower communities, post-disaster, and to engage in long term and greater self-sufficiency throughout the entire United States.

We need a better model for response and recovery, one that recognizes that emergency management efforts are locally executed, state-led, and federally supported.

Some of these imbalances have led towards, frankly, confusion and delays in response to assistance. We must correct that. We also recognize that there are some states who are going to be better and well suited and equipped to meet the challenges of tomorrow than others. That's not to pick favorites. That's to call upon the entire assemblage of this body so that all rising tides can lift all vessels.

Let us engage in greater partnerships. Greater conversations and navigations of the future to ensure that we all seek to improve and learn from one another.

True Federalism is only sustained for the framers of our Republic by strong and capable states, which bring balance to the leadership across this great nation. That is centric and core to me, not just philosophically, but also from an execution and management perspective.

I like to say that states are the ambassadors of truly neighbors helping neighbors. Hearing again conversations about Tennessee providing their assistance through the EMAC and I'm glad it's up there on the wall. What a unique opportunity to show neighbors helping neighbors. That is the true capacity and capability building that we seek to achieve.

I saw a great example of this while visiting the newly created Community Liaison program in Western North Carolina. They're meeting with officials who were hired, living in the communities, to act as additional resources on behalf of the FEMA mission.

While in that same location, I also met with an elected official who just lost his father in the devastation of that flood. Less than 24 hours later, he's still activating



all resources to help those in need. A man who's faced devastation personally and yet still sought to help others.

If that's not inspiring, I don't know what is. That is quite literally the definition of devastation being met by neighbors helping neighbors.

We at FEMA are here to support you. The entire federal community must seek to aid you at all phases of disasters, helping you to prepare, to build and to recover.

Yet, despite this, no survivors should have to wait for bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. to add inefficiencies and delays to the assistance they receive.

I can't stress that point enough. This is specifically why I was tasked and recruited to come and lead this agency, to ensure that we have the agency the American people deserve and need. And there's been so many tremendous successes. But as I said earlier, there are still areas of aggressive reform that are needed.

We must refocus on another central pillar of our work—the survivor-centric response.

I firmly believe that we must put survivors first in everything we do and everything that they need. And we must adapt our tools and processes in ways that make that easier, not more complicated.

Throughout my travels, I have listened to some of the most heartbreaking stories, some of which I've mentioned, others were quite extreme.

I have the same response for each of them.

"You deserve better answers than this. You deserve faster response." You deserve more assistance. And we must gird that very closely and ensure that we carry that forward. Each survivor, each state, each local body, deserves to be treated with the dignity and respect in which they're entitled to.

These are things that we are refocusing and balancing at FEMA. This means reaching out to them faster after disaster strikes.

This also means truly engaging in a listening session of our criticisms. It's not always been easy to have people vent to you about all the failures of the agency



in which I'm responsible for.

When my own parents call me about a rejection letter of aid and assistance that has my name written on the top, it makes family dinners a little bit more difficult to navigate, as you can understand.

While serving as a combat medic in the Military, I have had the occasion of treating both friend and foe on the battlefield. There is little more humbling than trying to save a life when watching someone give their very last breath.

In those moments, politics don't matter, The blood, the sweat, the dirt that connects you with another in a very surreal way. All you can think about is whether or not you brought every single piece of resource to bear to ensure their maximum chances of survivability.

Having said that, there will always be circumstances where catastrophe and loss are simply unavoidable. Emergency Management is certainly not immune from this. As you all know very well.

Despite the best preparation or mitigation strategies, this is a profession where unfortunately suffering can be a reality. Many times, suffering is a reality, and the resources we bring to bear should reflect that.

This means we must continually improve our practices, develop the latest and most cutting-edge tools and as we know, unprecedented manmade disasters that we face today can happen anywhere, at any time, with little to no predictive indicators.

These disasters expose our communities to risk, and we must lean into that aggressively. This is also why we must be laser focused on what I believe is FEMA's third pillar and attention. Readiness is the key to a secure homeland. We must maintain our operational readiness for the future.

Imagine, if you will, an emergency management academy of the future, led by FEMA, in which standards and true professional development and excellence can be defined within this line of work. Imagine that we must also seek to advance our technology, making response more coordinated and services easier for survivors to navigate.



We are building systems now -- we started weeks ago -- that improve the ability to share information with our state and local partners and facilitate our survivors to gain access to the resources that they need – faster.

We want these technological solutions, which we hope to have implemented in the coming months, to reduce time frames from hours to days as opposed to weeks, months, or God forbid, at times, years.

We must prepare our minds to meet the challenges of tomorrow, both seen and unseen. The goal is to enhance our operational readiness while maintaining the survivor-centric mentality in everything, so that we ultimately do what?

We execute our mission faster and in a more impactful way. That is the mantra that many of you have already been living by. That is the example that many of you, many of you have already displayed, and it's our honor to partner with you in that capacity.

I also have to stress the importance of our partnerships. In an uncertain future, partnerships are essential. I cannot overstate the importance of this.

As I see it, redefining our organizational roles and responsibilities will allow us to then leverage other industries, other partners, other capabilities to ultimately adapt and become faster, especially our private sector partners, who I'll refer to again as the performance-enhancement drugs of emergency management.

Our federal agency partners are also crucial because there is bureaucracy. There is difficulty in understanding the intertwined layers and framework of overlapping responsibilities of the federal government. We have to navigate this. We have to clarify this.

This is specifically the role that FEMA must lead in, that FEMA must step up to the call so that you have the answers you deserve, so that we can develop a more intricate and sophisticated method of deployment.

Our goal is truly to assemble the team of teams, and I could not be more honored to speak here at NEMA on how exactly we can achieve that, because this is the team of teams. These are the representatives and organizations that we will require for the threats of tomorrow.



Together, we can serve as the architects of what I consider the most collaborative, survivor-centric emergency management model that the world has ever seen. And we have an opportunity to do that here and now.

In closing, I want to also allow some opportunity to recognize the character and leadership are contagious throughout this environment and community. I see all of that in this room, as well as the opportunities to navigate the threats to our homeland, both today and tomorrow.

Lastly, think of a scenario of the future.

These are the things that keep me up at night. Think of a Hurricane Katrina, except worse. And then think of a 9/11, except worse. And then think of those two placed together, simultaneously.

In the first scenario that we'll play out, imagine these circumstances unfold where we lack true capacity and capability of our state and federal resources, where we are unable to meet the needs of survivors meeting those challenging times, and where our nation is wholly and completely unprepared. The consequence of that is catastrophe. It is calamity at its finest.

Now we'll back up and think about that same environment with a different scenario, a scenario where we have spent years building true capacity and capability, the likes of which the world has never seen before, where we have those resources to bear, and we are able to be responsive for those in need, and as a nation we have redefined what preparedness looks like, and we are ready for challenges that we face.

When I look into the future, I see the need for results because results will be required when times matter most. Together, we all can frame that. And together we all can be architectures of that narrative for the American people in the future.

And it is a bright future that I believe we absolutely can have.

When survivors get the help they need in a timely, effective way where we communicate more effectively to ensure that their involvement in decision making that has direct impact on their communities. Where disaster duties are distributed more evenly because we leverage the skills and resources of so many of our critical partners. And where, most importantly, communities across this great



nation emerge with a greater prepared mindset and resources to be there so that we can truly thrive. given the challenges that we face today as well as those of the future.

By working together, we can pull off arguably what will be one of the greatest shifts of operational priorities that we have ever seen in this nation. Emergency management as a field is critical, and we at FEMA are here to embark on that journey with you in the future.

Anchored in readiness and resilience, secure in the mission of helping others on their absolute worst day.

Thank you all for your time and God bless you.

