

**Statement Of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management
Hearing On
“U.S. Mayors Speak Out: Addressing Disasters in Cities”
March 4, 2010**

I am pleased that the Subcommittee is holding this important hearing to consider recommendations from the United States Conference of Mayors on how we can improve the provision of assistance in the wake of major disasters.

Today, we will hear from three Mayors who served as members of the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Stafford Act Reform task force. The Mayors we will hear from today, unfortunately, have first-hand experience with disasters: Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans, Louisiana; Mayor Franklin Cownie of Des Moines, Iowa; and Mayor Robert Duffy of Rochester, New York. We will also hear from representatives of state and local emergency managers and flood plain managers. These officials work with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) authorities and programs every day and would implement any of the recommendations that are adopted.

The 24 members of the Stafford Act Reform task force represent all regions of the country and communities who are at risk for virtually every hazard our nation faces. This, once again, highlights the importance of an “all hazards approach” to emergency management. I appreciate the thoughtful work these Mayors have done to reflect on their experiences and pool their collective knowledge to allow the rest of the nation to learn from their experiences.

In particular, I would like to thank the Chair of the Task Force, Mayor Nagin, who will soon be stepping down as Mayor of New Orleans. Mayor Nagin's city faced a disaster like none other seen in the nation in our lifetime. Mayor Nagin is no stranger to this Committee and has previously appeared before us to discuss the effects of Hurricane Katrina and the assistance needed to help his city recover. At today's hearing, Mayor Nagin and his colleagues are not here to seek assistance for their cities, but rather make recommendations, based on their experiences, for changes that will assist in future disasters.

The Stafford Act Reform task force issued a comprehensive report in January recommending changes to the Stafford Act and FEMA's disaster assistance programs. This report covers a broad range of issues including catastrophic disasters, disaster response, preparedness, hazard mitigation, individual and household assistance, insurance, and FEMA's program administration. Some of the recommendations in the Mayors' report can be implemented by FEMA now, either through rulemaking or by changes in policy or practice.

Other recommendations require a change in law. The Committee agrees with many of the recommendations contained in the report and has already addressed some of the recommendations in legislation. In November 2009, the Committee ordered H.R. 3377, the “Disaster Response, Recovery, and Mitigation Enhancement Act of 2009,” reported favorably to the House. I am pleased to have sponsored this legislation along with Chairwoman Norton,

and Ranking Members Mica and Diaz-Balart. Provisions in the bill that address recommendations in the Mayors' report include: providing temporary mortgage and rental assistances to individuals and families at risk of losing their homes due to disaster; additional Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds for states that adopt and enforce a state-wide building code; enhancing FEMA's case management program; special procedures for disasters with "extensive and widespread damage," and requiring FEMA to implement several long overdue provisions, including a cost-estimating procedure for the Public Assistance Program, and state administration of the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

While there appears to be consensus on some of the recommendations in the Mayors' report, as we will hear today, in other instances further study is warranted. Today's hearing marks the first step in that process.

I welcome each of you and look forward to your testimony.

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