

Written Testimony of Laurel Blatchford

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Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Coats, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the ongoing effort to rebuild in the region impacted by Superstorm Sandy. I currently serve as Executive Director of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force established by President Obama and chaired by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Shaun Donovan. The President established the task force by executive order in December and charged us to “work to ensure that the Federal Government continues to provide appropriate resources to support affected State, local, and tribal communities to improve the region's resilience, health, and prosperity by building for the future.”

With that mission in mind my testimony today will cover three subjects: 1) an assessment of the damage caused by Superstorm Sandy; 2) lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and how we are applying those lessons to this rebuilding effort; and 3) a brief background on the formation and role of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force and the supplemental funding provided by Congress.

The Impact of and Damage Caused by Superstorm Sandy

Superstorm Sandy and the Nor'easter that followed have had immense and varied impacts in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, and a number of other States. Within the United States, the storm caused 162 fatalities, major flooding, structural damage, and power loss to over 8.5 million homes and businesses, directly affecting more than 17 million people as far south as North Carolina, as far north as New Hampshire, and as far west as Indiana. Sandy caused tens of billions of dollars in damage and is estimated to be the second most costly storm in American history.

Especially hard hit were New York and New Jersey, which employ 12.7 million workers. Combined, they export about \$90 billion in goods annually, accounting for about 7 percent of such exports, and contributed \$1.4 trillion to our gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011, accounting for more than 11 percent of GDP.

The widespread damage from Superstorm Sandy impacted communities in a variety of ways. Hundreds of small businesses and tens of thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed. State, local and Tribal governments must address damage to roads, bridges, mass transit and other essential infrastructure, including electrical and water treatment facilities, public hospitals, and shorelines.

Ongoing Response and Recovery Efforts and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina

Before I describe the task force's activities, it is important to note the unprecedented cooperation that is taking place among Federal, State, local, and Tribal authorities. HUD, FEMA and other parts of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as the Departments of Transportation, Health and Human Services, Interior, Commerce, and Agriculture, plus the Small Business Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and other agencies are all working together. For example, as a result of coordination under the National Response Framework (NRF), within a week after Sandy hit there were almost 11,000 National Guard and 17,000 Federal responders on the ground from FEMA, the Department of Defense, USACE, HUD, Department of Transportation, Department of Energy, and HHS, as well as tens of thousands of utility workers from across the nation. In addition, in the weeks since the storm, FEMA has approved approximately \$3.5 billion in emergency assistance and has paid over \$5 billion in flood insurance claims to help those insured rebuild their lives. We are all coordinating our work with State, local, and Tribal officials, who are doing a truly herculean job on the response and recovery. The private sector has been deeply involved as well. This unprecedented level of cooperation and partnership will help us continue to deliver recovery resources with speed and provide related assistance to the most affected areas.

Early in his first term, President Obama recognized that our experience during Hurricane Katrina and other previous disasters highlighted the need for additional guidance, structure, and support to improve how we as a Nation address disaster-related recovery and rebuilding challenges. In September 2009, President Obama charged the Departments of HUD and Homeland Security to work on this effort and to establish a Long Term Disaster Recovery Working Group, composed of more than 20 Federal agencies. HUD, DHS, and the Working Group consulted closely with State, local, and Tribal governments as well as experts and stakeholders, and worked to improve the Nation's approach to disaster recovery and to develop operational guidance for recovery efforts.

In September 2011, FEMA published the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF). The NDRF addresses the short, intermediate, and long-term challenges of managing disaster-related recovery and rebuilding. It sets forth flexible guidelines that enable Federal disaster recovery and restoration managers to operate in a unified and collaborative manner and to cooperate effectively with State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments. The NDRF defines core recovery principles; roles and responsibilities of recovery coordinators and other stakeholders; flexible and adaptable coordinating structures to align key roles and responsibilities and facilitate coordination and collaboration with State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments and others; and an overall process by which communities can take advantage of opportunities to rebuild stronger, smarter, and safer after a disaster.

The NRF and the NDRF contributed to the Federal government's ability to respond to and initiate recovery from the enormity of the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy with a

massive, multi-agency, multi-State coordinated response in support of State and local efforts.

There are three primary lessons that are guiding our efforts to support local community rebuilding efforts.

First, it is vitally important that both near and long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts start immediately following a disaster and that the Federal government takes a coordinated regional approach to the delivery of assistance to its State and local partners. To ensure this happens, the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force will fill this regional role, working in coordination with the Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinators under the NDRF, and focusing on rebuilding.

Second, this must be an "All-of-Nation" approach to rebuilding. While the Federal government has a key role to play in recovery, State, local, and Tribal governments must be key partners in this effort. Third, the recovery effort must include rebuilding in a more resilient fashion rather than simply recreating what was already there so that we are prepared for current and future disasters.

The Role of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force

Because Sandy was one of the most devastating and costly natural disasters in our history, the President recognized that the response required an additional focus on rebuilding efforts coordinated across Federal agencies and State, local, and Tribal governments in order to effectively address the enormous range of regional issues.

On November 15, President Obama announced that HUD Secretary Donovan would provide coordination in support of our rebuilding efforts, and issued Executive Order 13632 on December 7, 2012, providing that Secretary Donovan would serve as chair of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force.

The Secretary's responsibilities in this role occur in coordination with the NDRF and involve cooperating closely with FEMA and the 20 other agencies already involved in recovery efforts. The focus of the Task Force is on coordinating Federal support as State, local and Tribal governments identify priorities, design individual rebuilding plans, and over time begin implementation. The Secretary is the Federal government's primary lead on engaging with States, Tribes, local governments, the private sector, regional businesses, non-profit, community and philanthropic organizations, and the public on long-term Hurricane Sandy rebuilding.

Secretary Donovan has explained that the Task Force does not seek to impose a one-size-fits-all solution on localities. Instead, drawing on expertise across the federal government, it provides leadership and connections that actively support local visions and rebuilding efforts. It has five major responsibilities:

First, and most important, the Task Force coordinates with all stakeholders to support cohesive rebuilding strategies and develop a comprehensive regional plan within six months of its first meeting.

Second, the Task Force works to identify and remove obstacles to effective rebuilding efforts and reduce regulatory burdens.

Third, the Task Force is working to coordinate Federal recovery resources and to make sure that the resources the Federal government provides are informed by local priorities.

Fourth, the Task Force will develop a plan for monitoring progress in rebuilding efforts.

Finally, the Task Force provides coordination in rebuilding efforts, including with respect to technical assistance and capacity building tools.

The Task Force officially commenced its efforts on February 5. Secretary Donovan and I have been in constant contact with Federal, State, local, and Tribal officials to help identify areas where the Task Force can be particularly helpful, and we both look forward to working with this Subcommittee and other Members of Congress on this important effort.

The Task Force and Supplemental Funding

Rebuilding must be a community-driven effort, with a community-based vision at its heart. But supporting that vision through financial means is a key part of the Federal role – one that has consistently been provided by the Federal government for communities experiencing disaster.

On January 29, President Obama signed the Disaster Relief Appropriations Act of 2013. The supplemental funding bill included funds for FEMA and USACE projects, Transportation, support for the Small Business Administration and its disaster loan program, Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), funds to be provided to communities, and funding for a range of other critical priorities.

Federal agencies and departments have already begun the process of making this money available to State local and Tribal governments in the region. On February 4, the Department of Transportation made available \$2 billion through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) new Emergency Relief Program to help protect, repair, reconstruct, and replace public transit equipment and facilities that were badly damaged by Hurricane Sandy. The Federal Highway Administration has also made over \$2 billion available to rebuild roads and bridges damaged by Sandy and other disasters. In addition HUD has also announced the first round of allocations of CDBG-DR funding, totaling \$5.4 billion. This represents the fastest ever allocation following the signing of an appropriations bill.

The Task Force's role is not to dictate how this funding is used – instead, it is to find ways to leverage and maximize the impact of these dollars and to help communities access this funding and use it to support their development priorities. An example of the Task Force's

efforts to date is working toward a data sharing arrangement that will allow SBA and HUD to provide State, local and Tribal governments with general information on small business disaster loan applications in areas impacted by Sandy.

In addition to providing the necessary resources to continue ongoing response and recovery efforts, the Disaster Relief Appropriations Act also provides funding to help impacted communities effectively mitigate future risk of disaster to prevent losses of this magnitude from recurring.

Science tells us that extreme weather events are likely to be more intense in the future, so it is vital that communities rebuild in a way that mitigates the risks posed under future conditions as well as current storms.ⁱ

We look forward to continuing to work with this Subcommittee, others in Congress and our Federal, State, local, and Tribal partners to help make local rebuilding visions a reality – and to support communities that are rebuilding in a way that makes them stronger, more economically competitive and better prepared to withstand the next storm.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

ⁱ NOAA's fact sheet at http://www.nrc.noaa.gov/plans_docs/SoS_Fact_Sheet_Hurricanes_and_Climate_FINAL_May2012.pdf: "Studies available for the Atlantic Basin suggest increased hurricane intensity, hurricane rainfall rates and the numbers of the most intense hurricanes over the 21st Century. However, the projections for intensity and intense hurricane numbers in particular have relatively large uncertainty and further research is needed to increase understanding."