



**Testimony of H. Edward “Eddie” Hicks, Jr.,  
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And President  
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**Before the**

**Subcommittee on Homeland Security  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate**

**On**

**A Review of the Status of Emergency Management in the U.S,**

**Including the Important Role Communications Systems Play During a Disaster**

Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Coats, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on this critically important topic.

I am Eddie Hicks, the Director of Emergency Management for Morgan County, Alabama. I serve as the President of the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA) and while I am providing this statement on their behalf, I also want to describe some of the experiences that my county has had in the recent tornadoes, as well as the experiences of other Alabama counties. I would like to begin by talking a little bit about IAEM followed by some background information about Morgan County. After that, I'd like to move into comments on how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responding, and how the programs this Committee helps to fund are operating in actual disasters and emergencies. I have been a local government emergency manager for 31 years. I also served three terms as President of the Alabama Association of Emergency Managers.

**US Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM-USA)**

IAEM-USA is our nation's largest association of emergency management professionals, with 5,000 members including emergency managers at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector. Most of our members are U.S. city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks. We deeply appreciate the support this subcommittee has provided to the emergency management community over the past few years, particularly your strong support for the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG), the Emergency Management Institute (EMI), and for strengthening FEMA.

## **Morgan County, Alabama**

My jurisdiction is Morgan County which has a population of 160,000. We have a major concentration of industries that includes chemical plants, steel production facilities, an appliance manufacturer and even a rocket manufacturer. Additionally a portion of the county is in the 10 mile emergency planning zone (EPZ) for the Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant, one of the largest nuclear power plants in the nation. The Tennessee River forms the northern border of the county and is a major river transportation corridor. We are served by two railroads and an interstate highway. Morgan County has a history of being pro-active in industrial emergency preparedness as there was an industrial planning group active years before Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC's) were mandated by Congress in Title III of the Superfund Amendment and Reauthorization Act (SARA) of 1986.

Morgan County faces a number of different hazards including flooding, ice storms, tornadoes, hazardous materials transportation incidents, and wildfires. While our industrial facilities are good corporate neighbors, we are subject to the vulnerabilities that come along with the assets they provide to our community.

Many things have changed in emergency management from my first involvement with it just over three decades ago. One example of this is our emergency operations plan. When I was hired in 1979 as the Civil Defense Director of my county, my first assignment was to update the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). While that plan was a good plan there is little comparison to the comprehensive plans that are standard in today's modern emergency management offices. In Morgan County we augment our all-hazard EOP with special annexes that address specific issues or concerns, examples are: mass casualty plans, emergency commodity distribution plans and mass medicine distribution plans. One planning effort that I am especially proud of is our suite of Continuity of Operations Plans. These plans outline the procedures to re-establish the critical functions of government after a disaster would destroy facilities. We have developed these plans for all essential county and municipal offices including all 21 of our volunteer fire departments.

I'd also like to take a moment and describe the comprehensive process and involvement of stakeholders that happens when we make or update our plans. When our current plan was created, we assembled a diverse array of stakeholders including, among others, the Morgan County Sheriff's Department, Police Chiefs from Decatur, Hartsell, Priceville, Somerville, Trinity and Faulkville; the Decatur and Hartsell Fire & Rescue departments; the 21 volunteer fire departments within our county; our municipal utilities and a Rural Electric Co-op (REC); various public works departments; the three school systems within our county; and, representatives of the local industrial base. These partners were not only involved in the creation of our EOP, but they are also helping us to review our plan and planning process regarding our response to the recent tornadoes. In addition, we also engage in a Radiological Emergency Preparedness Program (REPP) in conjunction with the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant. We engage in exercises annually with this facility. The exercises are "graded" by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) on an every other year basis. To further our training and expertise we regularly exchange staff during emergency drills with the Farley Nuclear Plant in Houston County in South Alabama.

Our Alabama tornadoes – and those in other states – have made national news and are rewriting the record books. During April 2011, Alabama experienced over 103 tornado touchdowns including tornados with tracks of 132 miles, 122+ miles, 122 miles, 98 miles, 80 miles and 72 miles. According to the American Red Cross, an estimated 7,300 homes were destroyed and an additional 5,800 received major damage. The death toll for the April 27 tornadoes in Alabama stands at 241. Total debris from all the April storms in Alabama has been estimated at 8,441,970 cubic yards. According to FEMA, over 4 million cubic yards of debris has been removed as of June 3, 2011. Alabama has a total of 67 counties – and 43 of them have received major disaster declarations. On April 27<sup>th</sup> Morgan County was under 3 separate tornado watches, 20 separate tornado warnings and experienced 3 tornado touchdowns (one of these was an EF5 and one was an EF4).

### **FEMA Response to the Alabama Tornadoes**

Next, I would like to address the issue of FEMA response during the Alabama tornadoes. To do this I asked several of my colleagues in Alabama counties a series of questions.

- What has been going well, and what is going better compared to past disasters?
- Where is there room for improvement in our interactions with FEMA?

#### **What is going well and what is going better compared to past disasters?**

FEMA has responded in a much more efficient way than in past disasters. One thing, in particular, that most of the counties in our area agreed on was how beneficial it was when the counties affected by the tornadoes were assigned a FEMA liaison. This greatly enhanced the flow of information and coordination, especially during the initial response phase. During a discussion with one of the FEMA county liaisons, he said, "...the mind set of FEMA has changed over the past few years from preparing to respond three days after the disaster to preparing for immediate response in the affected state or five days prior to landfall for a hurricane."

I was involved in the response during Hurricane Ivan and Hurricane Katrina and the difference between then and now is night and day. Anyone working in response activities in Alabama will quickly realize that there is a true partnership between local, state and federal organizations. The much needed resources are being efficiently delivered on time and where they are most needed.

In Huntsville, Madison County, 16,000 residents were registered by FEMA. The Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) were expanded to include not only FEMA and the Small Business Administration (SBA) but also the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Veteran's Administration (VA), the local builder's association, local real-estate association, the Better Business Bureau (BBB), crisis counseling, Faith Based and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) representatives. The FEMA folks were actively engaged in providing one stop service for the affected families.

FEMA and the Army Corp of Engineers have begun to initiate a new program called “Operation Clean Sweep.” This program will enable property owners in the worst impacted areas to apply for assistance to remove debris from their private property when it impacts public safety. They must submit a right of entry form to the Corps in order to receive this assistance.

### **Where is there room for improvement in our interactions with FEMA?**

The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) provides post disaster assistance. The availability of these funds normally takes from eight months to a year after the disaster happens. At the request of local communities, both Alabama and FEMA are trying to coordinate the immediate availability of a significant portion of the anticipated funding. Our recovery from this tornado will be the largest re-building effort Alabama has ever faced. People want to start rebuilding now and may not take protective measures – like in home or community safe rooms – if mitigation funds are not readily available for another year. If this first time “early” funding becomes a reality our citizens can start planning and building back for a safer community now instead of next year. Disaster survivors across our nation could benefit if this practice were adopted for future disasters.

While the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) is not a FEMA run program, there are FEMA reimbursement issues associated with it. EMAC is the agreement between all 50 states approved by Congress for mutual aid – and it works well to get the right resources to the right place in time to conduct rescue and response in the impacted area. However, some states have had problems with the reimbursement process. Alabama’s counties and cities were able to provide resources to other gulf states through EMAC within 48 hours and some counties were still not reimbursed after 30 months or longer.

The Madison Fire Heavy Rescue Unit and a Team of Madison County Sherriff’s Deputies were deployed during the Hurricane Gustav response in September, 2008. While the response was immediate and the mission only lasted a couple of weeks, it took until January 2010 to get reimbursed. A number of Alabama counties had the same experience.

It is our fear that slow reimbursement will eventually result in reluctance to lend critical resources under EMAC due to the adverse economic impact on local budgets during these difficult economic times.

### **The Impact of Programs Funded by this Committee**

Earlier in my remarks, I extended a thank you to the Committee for its support of EMPG. Emergency Managers appreciate that this Committee recognizes that EMPG funding is fundamentally different than the Homeland Security grants which came into existence only ten short years ago. EMPG funding has a history of more than five decades, and has a 50 percent cost share to demonstrate the commitment of state and local governments to being prepared for all hazards. In fact, EMPG funding has been called the backbone of the Emergency Management system. I would like to tell you about some of the specific things that helped us funded by EMPG or coordinated by emergency managers partially funded by EMPG.

Emergency Management programs at the local level in Alabama have been able to build partnerships between local governments, volunteers, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Some of the specific examples that illustrate this are:

- Partnerships involving volunteer reception centers in our Alabama counties. These centers provided for a place to receive volunteers and to match volunteer resources with the unmet needs in the community. This matching has allowed our communities to increase their speed of recovery. In addition, these centers have helped us to control one of the potential “disasters after the disaster” by making sure volunteer resources are applied to areas in need with some logic and rigor.
- For the last few years the state of Alabama has passed through 65 percent of available EMPG funding to local government Emergency Management Agencies. The creation of strong local programs and fostering mutual aid agreements state wide enabled counties to quickly assess the extent of and begin the response to a truly catastrophic disaster before the wind stopped blowing. Counties were helping each other during the initial response and are still providing mutual aid as we speak.
- Morgan County conducts an annual full scale exercise typically designed by EMPG funded staff. Last year’s exercise involved working with the Alabama State Mortuary Team in identifying the simulated victims of a simulated tornado. Fortunately our tornado event on April 27, 2011 did not produce fatalities – but the experience gained in the simulation by that team was regretfully utilized in DeKalb County.
- Some counties used Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) teams to distribute ice, water, food and tarps in the affected areas. Others had their CERT teams active in the immediate response. Billy Green, Assistant Director for Tuscaloosa EMA, writes:

“I guess my biggest highlight was on Saturday, April 23, 2011 when I graduated my first Hispanic CERT Team. They were all members of the Knights of Columbus from Holy Spirit Catholic Church... Who would have ever known that on Wednesday they would be putting all their skills to use?... Several of them lived in the Alberta City area that was affected... They came together and first began search and rescue... I was actually unaware of them getting out until we took the tour with the Governor and we passed a truck. As we passed, I looked up and there was a truck load of Hispanic guys wearing CERT Vests and Helmets... Those were my guys!!!! I actually got a call from Indiana about their use of USAR markings... They would later assist the Tuscaloosa Police Department with translators. They would later go on to staff a shelter at Holy Spirit Catholic Church... I’m really proud of them... I also had several individuals who graduated from my Campus CERT Class that helped out in the areas where they lived... They however acted individually and not as a group... But they used the training to take care of themselves which allowed them to help their neighbor. One of them has gone on and initially volunteered at our Volunteer Reception

Center and is now working for the City of Tuscaloosa as part of the disaster response....

The Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) has been a cornerstone of our medical and responder team building since 2002. We have been able to develop plans and purchase medical response capability across 16 counties in north Alabama with MMRS funding coordinated by my colleague John “Rusty” Russell, the Emergency Management Director of Madison County (Huntsville) Alabama. We provided training and exercises that have added cohesion to the way traditional responders and medical professionals work together during emergencies.

In November 2007 a Huntsville City School bus with a driver and 41 students, plunged seventy-five feet from an interstate overpass. The bus landed vertically and toppled over killing three students and injuring several others. The response was immediate and working within the MMRS plan, 40 students were transported to our two major hospitals within 40 minutes. Plans were activated and surely helped save many lives as trauma victims were quickly triaged and cared for. Our MMRS group had provided an exercise that was called “eerily similar” in the weeks preceding the fatal bus crash. That training and exercises in which responders and hospital staff had participated enabled them to coordinate and communicate and provide efficient patient tracking.

After the April 27 tornadoes, the emergency medical equipment and supplies provided by MMRS were deployed and used in the impacted areas of even the most rural North Alabama counties. The North Alabama Medical Reserve Corp, serving sixteen counties, was deployed and staffed 211 medical hot lines and temporary clinics in the impacted areas to administer tetanus vaccine and treatment of minor injuries. The North Alabama Medical Reserve Corp was developed under MMRS in 2006. The State Mortuary Teams – partially funded by MMRS – were deployed in north east Alabama. Twenty-six deceased victims were processed in DeKalb County during the initial response to the tornadoes.

### **Some Best Practices**

Since 1971, north Alabama has been drawn together through the North Alabama Mutual Aid Association which includes sixteen counties. The association consists of local EMA’s and the extended community of response and public safety organizations such as the Alabama Department of Environmental Resources, Department of Public Health, National Weather Service, local, state and congressional elected official’s staff members. Every county and city government has signed the mutual aid agreement. Coordination and response from county to county has become almost automatic and is encouraged by the state. The majority of emergency incidents are coordinated locally without help from the state or federal agencies. It is the practice of our association that local resources should be used first.

## Communications

Communications before, during, and after a crisis are crucial and there are various different types of communication.

**Predisaster communications.** Communications before a disaster consist of continuing public education and training programs, public appearances before almost any group that will give us time to share the message of preparedness, storm spotter training, the media, and working with our front line emergency responders. In the last three instances in particular we are concentrating on building relationships so that we know each other well in advance of a disaster. We have a particularly close bond with our colleagues at the National Weather Service. In my county we test our outdoor warning sirens once a month year around to determine the status of the system and to remind the public of what sound the devices make when activated. An additional purpose of this testing is to remind people to seek out information as soon as the outdoor warning sirens activate so they can take appropriate action to save their lives and the lives of their loved ones from a disaster or emergency.

**During the Disaster.** Communications during the disaster are typically broken down into three areas: emergency alert and warning; communications among emergency responders; emergency information to the public.

For alert and warning we capitalize on relationships with local media and activate our outdoor warning devices to indicate that the public should seek information on how to protect themselves. Communication among responders involves the use of two way public safety radio systems and the issues of interoperability inherent in those systems. In my county and other areas of Alabama we have multiple ways of approaching interoperability including “black box” solutions and public private partnerships.

In Morgan County we have a multi-use radio system with the major industrial facilities to provide warning and coordination during emergencies. For public emergency information, we rely mainly on our traditional news media outlets. The state of Alabama is actively engaged in utilizing social media to get emergency messages out to its citizens. It is an emerging capability for many of the counties but lack of personnel in most counties has inhibited its use to the fullest.

**After a Disaster.** Communications after a disaster can pose numerous problems. In an attempt to provide adequate redundancy, we have multiple ways to communicate with our neighboring counties and the State of Alabama. These include “plain old telephone system” (POTS), cellular telephones, 800 MHz state-wide two-way public safety radio systems, and the Internet. As communications systems are restored and conditions return closer to normal, communications once again assumes a “pre disaster” footing.

**Outcomes.** I had conversations with several of the emergency managers from the most impacted Alabama counties regarding their communications issues after the April tornadoes. Almost every one of them said they had challenges but were able to solve most of the issues. Alabama has 8 mobile communication units and all 8 were activated and used to restore communication gaps. Many of the communication issues involved areas of the state that were

underserved by communications prior to the storm. A combination of augmenting existing communication towers and networks and sometimes commercial cell phone providers providing temporary service to the area solved many of the communication issues. While many areas had less than perfect communication, the ability to utilize alternate towers and or frequency in many cases provided basic communication capabilities. In many cases where power to communication systems was disrupted the systems continued to work due to battery backups and the ability to provide generator power to the repeaters. Many of the counties in Alabama utilize a commercial 800 MHz radio system. This system, Southern Link, was able to provide dependable service throughout the whole state. When counties needed additional capabilities they were provided with additional radios.

### **Emergency Management Institute (EMI)**

EMI and its predecessor – the Civil Defense Staff College at Battle Creek, Michigan (1954 – 1980) – have been essential in the development of Emergency Managers and the overall professionalism within our field. When I began my Emergency Management career, I attended what was then called “The Phase Courses,” followed by a “Capstone Course” at EMI. Over the years, this changed and my colleagues and I at the local level – as well as IAEM-USA are thrilled with the development of the new Foundational Academy at EMI. Once again, EMI will be able to offer the basics of becoming an Emergency Management professional – from a practical perspective – to those who will comprise our next generation. We urge the Committee to continue its support of EMI. We gratefully note that the Senate Appropriations Committee Report on the FY 2011 Appropriations for the Department of Homeland Security (S.Report 111-222) included \$11 Million for EMI. If it had been enacted, this modest increase would have allowed for a more aggressive timeline to revise, update and modernize their portfolio of offerings.

### **Closing**

In closing, we want to make sure and communicate that there is a new and more nimble FEMA on the ground in Alabama. Our local Alabama emergency managers especially appreciate having FEMA liaisons to provide information and solve problems quickly. We are hopeful that the HMGP program will be made available to our citizens more quickly than the typical one year time frame so that opportunities for safer rebuilding can happen now so they are not lost in the future. We are especially grateful for the support of this committee for EMPG and for EMI. These are critical elements in the maintenance and development of our local Emergency Management capability. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information in this hearing. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

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