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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION VIRTUAL HEARING ON IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS RESILIENCY AND RECOVERY DURING DISASTERS

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I want to thank the panelists for the insights they have provided. I also want to thank the FCC for hosting this virtual hearing so that we can speak frankly about the importance of strengthening the availability and accessibility of emergency information for all. One method for producing a healthy and inclusive communications network is ensuring it is resilient – technologically and geographically – to maximize the reach and ensure accessibility for all impacted individuals.

FEMA is committed to the equitable delivery of programs and services to assist all individuals who are, or could be, affected by national emergency events. Whether it's the ongoing COVID-19 response, wildfires in the west, hurricanes in the east, or record-breaking flooding everywhere, we are on the ground in communities across the country to help everyone, inclusive of those with disabilities and mindful of individuals who are traditionally underserved.

As the frequency and intensity of storms and other weather-related events continue to increase with climate change, underserved communities are disproportionately impacted, and people with disabilities face greater challenges during response and recovery. Physical disabilities along with vision, hearing and speech disabilities require careful consideration to ensure equitable distribution of services.

I want to begin by sharing examples of how our Agency has considered equity and accessibility during disasters. FEMA has expanded its reach in assistive communications through IPAWS, the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System. IPAWS is FEMA's national system for local alerts and provides authenticated emergency and life-saving information to the public through mobile phones.

IPAWS uses the Common Alerting Protocol which allows alerts sent through the system to transport rich multi-media attachments and links. Local alerting authorities can use this information to develop content for compatible devices that can facilitate the receiving of emergency alerts by people who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind or low vision.

Addressing equity in disaster preparedness and response also means increasing language inclusivity. Over the past year we have provided live translations via telephone service and have increased the use of video phone for the deaf and hard of hearing community. During Hurricane Ida, FEMA deployed two dozen in-person translators who worked events, visited homes, and collaborated with Individual Assistance housing teams.

We are proud of these practices, but we know there is more to do. One of the most important preparedness steps we can take is planning alongside under-represented and higher-risk groups, including people with disabilities.

FEMA has a whole-of-community plan that includes the creation of strategic partnerships, the innovative use of data analytics, and readying FEMA staff for the inclusion of equity concepts in disaster messaging

operations. Our work requires us to continuously adapt to new conditions by incorporating new technologies and partnerships.

No matter how advanced the technology is, as a society, we will always accomplish more by working together. Ongoing engagement between people with disabilities and community leaders and groups is vital.

I want to thank you all for the opportunity to speak on this today and I look forward to continuing to engage in these discussions in the future. I know that no Agency or company can do this alone – we must work together, share lessons learned, and coordinate best practices to drive equity across all communities.