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Hearing on

“Saving Lives and Money Through the Pre-disaster  
Mitigation Program”

Before the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings  
and Emergency Management

**Testimony of The Honorable Betty Knight  
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Commissioner, Platte County, Missouri  
Board Member, Mid-America Regional Council**

April 30, 2008

Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Graves and members of the Subcommittee, I am Betty Knight, Platte County, MO Commissioner, President of the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) in Washington, DC and Board Member of the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City, MO. Please accept this written testimony for the Congressional Record in response to pre-disaster mitigation on behalf of the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC).

The National Association of Regional Councils is a national non-profit trade organization that serves as the national voice for regionalism, advocating for multi-regional cooperation as the most effective way to address community planning and development opportunities and issues. NARC is governed by local elected officials and represents member organizations composed of multiple local governments that work together to improve America's communities - large and small, urban and rural. Through advocacy and assistance, NARC's mission is to increase funding and authority for regional councils, regardless of their size, to strengthen American regions and communities in transportation, economic and community development, homeland security and the environment.

Regional councils (RCs) deliver an array of federal, state and local programs that provide planning support and technical assistance to local governments in the areas of transportation, economic and community development, homeland security and the environment. The network of nationwide regional councils includes organizations such as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Councils of Government (COG), Rural Planning Organizations (RPO), Economic Development Districts (EDD) and Local Development Districts (LDD). Regional Councils and MPOs are created by compact and enabling legislation as consortia of local governments. As such, regional councils and MPOs represent local elected officials from cities, counties, townships, and villages. Their mission being the delivery of services and programs for economic development, first responder and 911, health care, infrastructure development, aging services, air and water quality, land-use planning, work force development, and transportation at a regional level.

One important function that many regional councils perform is that of regional pre-disaster preparation and planning that utilizes regional solutions to sustaining and improving vital national homeland security functions, which are imperative to the safety and security of communities. Regional councils have over forty years of expertise in pre-disaster regional coordination, management and mitigation with federal, state and local governments, as well as the private sector, and represent 35,000 of the 39,000 local, general purpose governments in the United States (counties, cities, townships, towns, villages, and boroughs). Regional councils are proven effective in overcoming multi-jurisdictional barriers and preparing necessary response plans and assisting our nation's heroic first

responders. Many regional councils provide data, planning, technical assistance, management, and other information and services for the purpose of finding effective means of mitigating the detrimental effects of nature on the population, infrastructure and cultural fabric.

Manmade and natural disasters do not stop at city, county or state boundaries and, therefore, regional cooperation to plan, prepare, respond and mitigate accordingly is necessary to ensure and protect the safety and security of our nation's citizens, resources, communities and future. The work and resources of regional councils should be more readily utilized and supported by federal, state and local governments nationwide to strengthen the homeland security, pre- and post-disaster, promote innovation through regional government approaches, and save lives and money through regional strategies.

### **Documented Support**

The unfortunate events of 9/11 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita underscore the importance of timely pre-disaster homeland security planning and mitigation to protect the safety and security of our families, communities and country. In order to bolster our nation, both pre- and post-disaster, it is necessary to recognize and support the critical roles regional councils play in coordination, planning and sustained response on a multi-city, county, state and regional basis. Mitigation programs provide the opportunity not only to develop plans to reduce risks, but more importantly, to implement those plans before disaster strikes.

There are numerous recommendations, catalogued successes and supportive research for integrating the regional approach in pre-disaster mitigation, emergency preparedness and response activities. In fact, March and May 2007 Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports respectively stated, that all Department of Homeland Security planning, training, and exercises efforts should "...fully support preparedness, response, and recovery responsibilities at a jurisdictional and regional basis... and expand regional collaboration." The reports also urged Congress, to "examine regional and multi-state planning and preparation" as a high priority.

A 2004 U.S. Government Accountability Office report also stated,

Particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, regional approaches have been recognized as a key way to address the threat of terrorism. In many urban areas, the threat of terror is regionwide, and resources for responding to that threat are distributed among many jurisdictions. Therefore, the most effective responses are coordinated and planned across the region, rather than being jurisdiction-specific.... Regional organization structures, flexibility to account for local conditions, and strategic planning

are key characteristics of regional coordination. Given the important role that regional planning and governance can play in improving national preparedness, these developments warrant continued congressional oversight.

Not only are federal agencies receiving recommendations and taking note, but leadership in states like Texas is promoting the regional role in pre-disaster mitigation. According to a 2008 report Governor Perry's Task Force on Evacuation, Transportation and Logistics:

The Governor's 24 Councils of Governments (COGs) are well-organized regions that provide a useful framework for regional planning. COGs should coordinate the development of regional evacuation plans by bringing together hurricane evacuation areas, state agencies, local governments and private stakeholders... Regional response and evacuation plans must be exercised regularly.

### **Regional Council Examples**

A well pre-planned, coordinated response to any emergency – manmade or natural – can reduce the loss of lives, property, commerce and communities. A regional response to disasters is best developed through existing councils of governments, planning commissions, development districts and MPOs. These organizations can:

- Bring together the necessary organizations and people to develop a comprehensive strategy for regional response based on local planning efforts;
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in any response system;
- Identify equipment needed to plan and respond effectively while avoiding unnecessary and expensive duplication;
- Establish understandings among local responders on equipment needs and use;
- Map escape routes, shelters, hospitals and supply areas;
- Map all terrain – both natural and manmade;
- Coordinate communications among various responders through interoperable systems; and,
- Hold periodic regional training sessions on pre-disaster mitigation and response.

### **Kansas City, MO – Mid-America Regional Council of Governments (MARC)**

The greater Kansas City area includes 1.7 million people in eight counties, three on the Kansas side and five in Missouri, and covers about 3,800 square miles, an area roughly the size of Connecticut. The eight counties include 116 city governments and are served by more than 75 fire and EMS agencies. These

counties, cities, and agencies are all coordinated through the Mid-America Regional Council, the region's association of local governments and metropolitan planning organization. MARC is also home to the Metropolitan Medical Response System Committee, a Local Emergency Planning Committee, a Metropolitan Emergency Managers Committee and the Regional Homeland Security Coordinating Committee (RHSCC).

MARC's RHSCC is comprised of 30 local leaders, including elected officials, fire chiefs, police chiefs, city and county administrators, and others from the existing committees. It provides leadership and coordination of the many homeland security and domestic terrorism preparedness efforts in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area with a regional, all-hazards approach. The committee strives to maximize public and private resources to protect the citizens of the greater Kansas City metropolitan area.

The overall strategy addresses the entire emergency management cycle (mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery); the RHSCC decided to give priority, at least initially, to developing the region's response capabilities, focusing on four key areas: training personnel, providing material resources, developing plans and policies, and building relationships.

Last July, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security awarded a grant award of \$8,350,000 to the Greater Kansas City area as part of the department's Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), which distributed nearly \$750 million to 46 metropolitan areas in Fiscal Year 2007. Since 2003, the Kansas City region has received about \$40 million through the UASI program. The RHSCC allocates the funds to promote regional preparedness, using an all-hazards approach to investments that will help local agencies not only prepare for and respond to potential terrorist threats, but also to natural disasters and accidents. This funding will be utilized for projects such as regional interoperable communications, training and exercise programs, disease surveillance, medical surge and mass care capabilities, the Terrorism Early Warning center, and citizen preparedness efforts.

**Washington, DC – Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG)**

The National Capital Region (NCR) faces unique homeland security preparedness challenges because the Nation's capital and the center of our Federal government reside within its boundaries. In addition to serving as the home of over 4.5 million residents and the workplace of over 340,000 Federal workers, an average of 20 million tourists visit the NCR each year. The NCR is the center of all three branches of Federal government, 231 Federal departments and agencies, and over 2,100 political, social, and humanitarian non-profit organizations. It is the home to monuments and icons of American life, history, and politics – including some of the most important symbols of national political power and democratic heritage.

The NCR is the fourth largest U.S. metropolitan area in terms of population and gross regional product, as well as the home to more than 40 colleges and universities and a large number of companies. A direct terrorist attack or natural or man-made disaster within the NCR could produce catastrophic losses in terms of human casualties and political and economic damage, in addition to profound damage to public morale and confidence.

Only a few days following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) moved quickly to lend its full support to the task of strengthening preparedness, coordination, communication and response in the National Capital Region. The region as a whole – local, state and federal government, and the critical private sector – all stepped forward in ways that could scarcely be imagined prior to September 11.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is a regional organization of local government elected officials, and area members of the Maryland and Virginia legislatures and the United States Congress representing districts in the metropolitan Washington area, totaling 19 participating local jurisdictions. Since 1957, COG has served as a venue for regional collaboration on a wide range of public policy issues, such as transportation, environment, public safety, human services, planning and development. COG is an independent, non-profit association, supported by financial contributions from local governments, federal and state grants and contracts, and donations from foundations and the private sector.

This *National Capital Region Homeland Security Strategic Plan 2007-09* developed by the National Capital Region (NCR) Homeland Security Partners emphasizes preparedness through regional collaboration. It draws all jurisdictions and their constituents into a long-term, unified effort to improve “all-hazards” preparedness across the NCR. This *Plan* lays out our Region-wide strategy for strengthening our capabilities across all phases of preparedness (prevention, protection, response, and recovery) to manage homeland security risks. It sets our course and provides a strategic approach for planning and decision-making. The jurisdictions that comprise the NCR have a long established tradition of collaboration and mutual aid to deal with such large scale, region-wide threats and events.

As representatives of the jurisdictions and other organizations, and as stewards of the Region’s safety and security, it is the responsibility of NCR to “Build and sustain an integrated effort to prepare for, prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from ‘all-hazards’ threats or events.”

**Arlington, TX – North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG)**

“Enhancing lasting partnerships and proactive Emergency Preparedness initiatives through advocacy, communication, and collaboration. “

The purpose of North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) is to strengthen both the individual and collective power of local governments and to help them recognize regional opportunities, resolve regional problems, eliminate unnecessary duplication of efforts, make joint regional decisions, and develop the means to implement those decisions.

In response to a nationally identified need to reduce our vulnerability to disasters, the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) Department of Environmental Resources, in cooperation with the Emergency Preparedness, Transportation, and Research & Information Services Departments, is coordinating multi-jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Action Planning (HazMAP) for the 16-county region, about 5.3 million people (and growing faster). The area of the region at 12,800 square miles is actually 400 square miles larger than Maryland and it has 236 member governments. Thus, it is expected that the level of detail possible in the HazMAP will be similar to many state plans. This includes, but is not limited to, detailed mapping for dams, earthquakes, expansive soils, floods, hail, icy roads, landslides, levees, steambank erosion, tornadoes, wind, wildfires, etc.

Hazard mitigation is the cornerstone of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) approach to reducing our nation's vulnerability to disasters. Hazard mitigation is defined as the actions taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people and property from hazards and their effects. This definition distinguishes actions that have a long-term impact from those that are more closely associated with immediate preparedness, response, and recovery activities. Hazard mitigation is the only phase of emergency management specifically dedicated to breaking the cycle of damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage. HazMAP is a multi-jurisdictional planning process consistent with the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (DMA 2000) and the requirements of the State of Texas Division of Emergency Management (TxDEM) that is putting into place a framework for coordinated and focused hazard mitigation actions both at the local and regional levels. Important elements include:

- Guiding the effort is a HazMAP Review Team from among NCTCOG's many advisory committees, supported by an extensive outreach effort called HazMAP Partners, with government, private sector, and public representatives;
- Identifying and prioritizing the risks of a range of natural and technological hazards;
- Considering where improved mitigation measures could help reduce hazard risks and vulnerability; and,
- Working with our members to craft an initial five-year implementation plan that will ensure continued local eligibility for federal funding.

NCTCOG received funding from FEMA, through TxDEM, to support this initial two-year effort. A \$420,000 federal grant is being matched with \$140,000 of in-

kind support from NCTCOG's iCommunities initiative; thus, no cash match was requested from the region's cities and counties.

The Stafford Act (amended by DMA 2000) requires FEMA-approved mitigation action plans by November 1, 2004, in order for local governments to participate in certain federal grant programs for disaster planning and relief. Based on anticipated federal rules, the process will include a five-year cycle for plan amendments with ongoing implementation; therefore, NCTCOG will be involved for the long haul.

NCTCOG values its partnerships among the various levels of government, and between the public and private sectors, is critical to the success of any planning process. For HazMAP, NCTCOG has long-standing positive relationships with all of the key Federal and State agencies, as well as important private sector organizations such as homebuilders, contractors and Chambers of Commerce.

**San Antonio, TX – Alamo Area Council of Governments (AACOG)**

The Alamo Area Council of Governments Hazard Mitigation Plan is designed to protect people and property from the effects of natural and man-made hazards. By taking action today, we can reduce the likelihood of injuries, loss of life and damage to our communities. In addition to developing a framework for action, the Regional Mitigation Plan enables participating counties and municipalities to apply for pre- and post-disaster mitigation funding that would not otherwise be available. This funding can help local jurisdictions implement desired goals and objectives outlined in the plan.

Participants in the AACOG regional planning process formulated the following guiding principles, which categorize the types of mitigation strategies ultimately adopted at the local level.

- Communication and Coordination
- Financial Resources
- Technical Assistance
- Training
- Planning
- Education and Public Participation
- Critical Facilities
- Infrastructure and Utilities
- Weather Warning Systems and Hazard identification Technologies
- Environmental Concerns

For each principle, regional-level goals were established along with more refined objectives. Each county and municipality was responsible for developing their own Mitigation Action Plan, which identified jurisdictionally-specific actions, written in the form of policies and projects. Each Mitigation Action Plan includes assigned responsibilities, potential funding sources and a timeline for

implementation. Action plans link the broad ideas established in the AACOG Regional Mitigation Plan with strategic, action-oriented tasks.

### **Federal Involvement**

While most view state and local jurisdictions' ability to detect, prevent and respond to a terrorist attack as a high priority, the function is inherently non-federal. Federal resources and expertise, however, are needed to manage the crisis, and provide support to state and local assets when an attack overwhelms their resources. Experience has shown that it will take the coordinated efforts of numerous jurisdictions and governments to successfully protect America's cities and counties in metropolitan and rural areas throughout the nation. Therefore, all disaster strategies need to be incorporated into a regional response. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), pre-disaster mitigation is important in the following ways:

- It creates safer communities by reducing loss of life and property damage. For example, the rigorous building standards adopted by 20,000 communities across the country are saving the nation more than \$1.1 billion a year in prevented flood damages.
- It allows individuals to minimize post-flood disaster disruptions and recover more rapidly. For example, homes built to NFIP standards incur less damage from floods. And when floods do cause damages, flood insurance protects the homeowner's investment, as it did for the more than 200,000 Gulf Coast residents who received more than \$23 billion in payments following the 2005 hurricanes.
- It lessens the financial impact on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. For example, a recent study by the Multi-hazard Mitigation Council shows that each dollar spent on mitigation saves society an average of four dollars.

FEMA currently administers three main mitigation programs: the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Flood Mitigation Assistance program, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation program. The funding for these homeland security activities are directed to state and local governments, particularly for the development of hazard mitigation plans and for implementing cost-effective hazard mitigation planning and projects before disasters occur. The "success" of these programs depends directly upon the readiness of the recipient community to effectively utilize the grants and pursue the same partnered, comprehensive approach. However, the regional approach is not stressed as the unifying element in the pre-mitigation disaster strategy. This is partly due to the fact that regional councils or councils of governments cannot be a primary grantee under these FEMA programs. These types of planning grants are provided to state and local governments and the COG's may assist communities by developing grant applications, as well as serving as a point of contact for grant administration and hazard mitigation plan development. They cannot, however, be a designated agent for a planning grant. This should be amended.

In fact, the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Mitigation Act (PL 106-390), clearly states that special measures (before or in the wake of a disaster) are necessary and designed to assist the efforts of the affected States and local governments in expediting the rendering of aid, assistance, and emergency services, and the reconstruction and rehabilitation of devastated areas. This omits the recognition and vital role of regional councils of governments in comprehensive disaster preparedness and assistance plans, programs, capabilities.

Local governments are frequently promised assistance from the federal government and other sources, but there is no unifying mechanism to implement approaches that can make a lasting impact on vulnerability reduction. The best known federal program that encourages a regional approach is the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant program. UASI is designed to set a strategic direction for the enhancement of regional response capability and capacity, and reduce area vulnerability by strengthening the cycle of response and by ensuring that potential targets are identified, assessed and protected. Grants are awarded based on a formula determined by a combination of factors including population density, critical infrastructure and threat/vulnerability assessment. More programs like this, bundled with a variety of other initiatives, need to be established at the federal level to trickle down to local government and regional councils of governments, maximizing the ability of the region to develop a strategy for a sustainable pre-disaster mitigation and post-disaster response.

Furthermore, federal funding needs to be apportioned to states based on identified potential terrorist targets and on tendency toward natural and man-made disasters. Adequate federal funding and increased regional authority are required for the regional development of interoperability, preparedness and response. This includes the establishment of a federal grant program that NARC has been advocating for since 2003 to provide funding to approved regional councils of government to develop and promulgate homeland security planning and response on a regional level with federal, state, regional, local and private sector partners.

### **Conclusion**

Homeland security efforts have and will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the activities and policies within public agencies at all levels of government. No single agency works in a vacuum, and man-made and natural disasters do not stop at city, county or state boundaries. Therefore, regional cooperation to plan, prepare, mitigate and respond accordingly is necessary to ensure and protect the safety and security of our nation's citizens, resources, communities and future. Regional coordination and cooperation don't always come easily, but the relationships built today will strengthen tomorrow's response.

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) and its member organizations offer its assistance moving forward. Thank you for allowing me to submit these comments.