Shaylin Sluzalis:

Hello, everyone and welcome. I'm just giving it a moment as folks are rolling in. I want to let folks know that we do have accessibility today and welcome and thank you for joining us. I'm going to start with a few accessibility reminders as we get started and then I will introduce myself and open up. We do have an ASL interpreter spotlighted, Kenya, so everyone can see her and we also have CART provided by FEMA today and thank you for providing these accessibilities and making sure that we are all able to communicate with one another. You should be able to locate the captions using the CC button on your Zoom navigation bar and if you have any technical assistance needs, please do let us know in the chat or email us at directors@disasterstrategies.org. With that, I want to get started and welcome everyone and thank you for joining the stakeholder call with FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell. My name is Shaylin Sluzalis. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a younger, disabled white woman and alongside me is -

German Parodi:

[foreign language 00:01:15] German Parodi, I use he/él pronouns and I'm the Co-Executive Director along Shaylin. I'm a Puerto Rican disabled men and we are the Co-Executive Director of The Partnership.

Shaylin Sluzalis:

Thank you all for joining us. Today's meeting we are joined by Administrator Criswell to discuss the long-standing systemic barriers and impacts people with disabilities have faced before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent disasters. As many folks may know, we've been working to meet with the FEMA administrator for many years now, and now that Deanne Criswell is in this position, congratulations and thank you for meeting with us. Although we only have 30 minutes with you today, we do have speakers with lived experience and subject matter expertise to speak to the long standing issues and identified solutions for administrator Criswell to address.

Shaylin Sluzalis:

Since we only have a half hour today, we are going to go through a lot of systemic issues that each deserve a robust conversation and I will begin by saying that our overarching goal is to get administrator Criswell's commitment to a longer time to speak with perhaps you and your leadership and we look forward to hearing your response following our brief speakers. So without further ado, I don't want to waste any more time, we'd like to get right into it. Our identified speakers today know what to do and we will get started by passing the mic over to Ebony Payne, Ebony.

Ebony Payne:

My name is Ebony Payne. I use she/her pronouns. I'm an African-American disabled 37 year old woman and I am stuck in a dangerous nursing home facility in Chicago, Illinois, because there are no emergency relocation options available to get me out of this scary and deadly place. I can't be vaccinated and staff here some are choosing not to vaccinate. I have been attacked and retaliated against for speaking out. I am scared for my life in this Petri dish. There are FEMA funds available to pay for my funeral, but there are no FEMA funds available for emergency protective measures for me to relocate safely. Thank you.

Misty Dion:

Hi, my name's Misty Deon and I use she/her pronouns. I'm the disabled woman and I'm the CEO of Roads to Freedom Center for Independent Living up in North Central PA. Our staff has been working throughout the pandemic to transition and provide emergency relocation for people out of deadly nursing facilities and into their own homes. We've been educating our county since day one and are now on our third reapplication for one of our 36 county, because of a lack of information and guidance presented by FEMA and PEMA and our local county emergency management agency. There are CILs across the nation that provide NHT and could easily implement emergency relocation programs if we had access to the additional resources like FEMA's public assistance category B funds, but we keep getting told e aren't eligible for reimbursement. CILS like RTF could help people like Ebony, if we're considered eligible private nonprofits for FEMA public assistance category B funds. Thank you.

Marcie Roth:

Tom. You're on mute.

Tom Olin:

My name is Tom Olin. I use love and him as pronouns. I'm an elder. I'm a white man with disabilities. I'm a resident of Texas and was impacted by the life-threatening winter storm of February, 2021. When needing a reasonable modification for the FEMA individual assistance application, I didn't have a way to identify that request. I clicked on question 24 hoping someone might ask me about my disability, but nothing happened. If this process would have been more clear, maybe my accommodation would have been met earlier and maybe I would have gotten the individual assistance I needed. Thank you.

Marcie Roth:

My name is Marcie Roth. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a disabled woman and the Chief Executive Officer of the world Institute on disability. I'm the original director of the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination. The details and the issues around the FEMA disaster assistance application and inability to request reasonable modifications has been a longstanding problem, something I've been raising since 2010, along with the complicated wording of "question 24." The Government Accountability Office and members of Congress have directed FEMA to fix these civil rights violations several years ago. FEMA must immediately provide an equitable way for disaster impacted applicants with disabilities to request reasonable modifications throughout the application process and identify their disability related losses.

Todd Holloway:

Good morning or good afternoon, my name is Todd Holloway. I use he/him pronouns. I am a disabled man and work for a center for independent living in Washington state. I am the Co-Chair of the NCIL Emergency Planning subcommittee. Since 2017, we have been working with partners across the nation to have a collaborative approach with federal stakeholders, but have been met with much resistance. There is a lack of engagement from FEMA at all levels and to the disability-led organizations that we're trying to communicate with through our federal agencies. An ongoing barrier when it comes to trying to work with FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination. When the lack of engagement comes from the top, it has a ripple effect on local emergency management and thus people most impacted, that being people with disabilities, there's constant finger pointing and directing stakeholders back and forth from federal to state to local and back to federal never ending circle. There needs to be real meaningful engagement from federal, from state and from local level that work together to identify problems and work towards solutions that save lives and maintain independence. Thank you.

Elissa Ellis:

[inaudible 00:08:29] Hello, my name is Elissa Ellis, I use she/her pronouns. I'm a woman with a disability, I am the Director of Operations for the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living or APRIL. It's important to note that working with one national organization or one local organization does not mean you're collaborating with the disability community at large. It is vital to have cross disability representation from every level and at every table. Equity includes contracting with disability led organizations for their subject matter expertise and valuable contributions and work.

Jim House:

Hello.

Jim House:

Hello, good morning. My name is Jim House. I am a deaf man and I use he and they pronouns. So I am the manager of the head of the Coalition for Inclusive Emergency PWlanning in Washington state for the independent living. During disasters I often find myself reminding everyone and anyone that will pay attention that they have to have an ASL interpreter, that it needs to be provided for the announcements. We need to be able to see the ASL interpreters on the screen, there needs to be some kind of picture in picture. We worked tirelessly and sometimes we have to... so we have complaints and lawsuits and we need access, but that's after the damage has been done. One of those examples is just that's, that's just one of those examples. However, training is where the effective access needs to be. The communication and the information during an after disasters is what I have a right to. Trainings must include different and effective experiences for equitable training and there should be contracts that are given to disability led organizations to contribute to these trainings. Thank you.

Melissa Marshall:

My name is Melissa Marshall. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a disabled woman and I'm the Director of Operations for The Partnership. I have a JD and a deep background in ADA and disability civil rights laws during disasters. There's a clear lack of adequate monitoring enforcement over the use of FEMA's federal financial assistance for recipients and sub-recipients. We're well aware of DHS CRL's obligation to monitor and enforce compliance. However FEMA's monitoring and enforcement is lacking. The equal rights office is almost as difficult to work with the Office of Disability Integration - ODIC - and there appears to be a lack of coordination between FEMA and DHS CRCL. As you well know, every federal dollar spent must be spent in compliance with civil rights obligations at every level. Equity cannot be achieved without compliance, this requires transparency, collaboration and comprehensive enforcement strategies. Thank you.

German Parodi:

Since the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination has chosen not to collaborate with us and block other FEMA staff from working with us, who can we look to as our point of contact, Administrator Criswell? The issues we have raised here, and many others we didn't have time today to raise, are not new. Leaving this meeting, what can we expect from you that will be different in reaching disability equitability?

Shaylin Sluzalis:

This is Shaylin, I want to thank you all for speaking today and I will pass it off to Marcie to introduce administrator Criswell.

Marcie Roth:

This is Marcie Roth speaking. From the first rumors of administrator Deanne Criswell potential appointment as FEMA's new administrator, I was hopeful that a four-year nightmare for disaster-impacted disabled people might be coming to an end. I first worked with Deanne Criswell on making FEMA core an inclusive option for youth with disabilities. Then in launching the new national incident management assistance teams with full-time disability advisers on every team throughout planning, training, and deploying as first on the ground advisers to disaster impacted states. I deployed with the Ms. Criswell on several occasions as her disability advisor and then had the opportunity after we both left FEMA to work together on implementation of some key disability inclusion efforts in New York City and in other ways. It is with great hope and appreciation that she has taken on this very important role as a public servant once again, and I want to turn to Administrator Criswell now. We very much hope that this is the beginning of a significant change in what happens for people with disabilities and the whole community before, during and after disasters.

Deanne Criswell:

Hi Marcie, thank you so much for that introduction. Thank you all for the opportunity to join this meeting today and to hear from you. I'm just going to say just a couple of things and then would love to be able to answer some questions more specifically. First, I just want to say that FEMA does remain committed to helping people with disabilities before, during and after disasters. One of my priorities as I came into this role was to advance equity across all of our programs. We have been doing that since I was with FEMA originally on the team, as Marcie mentioned, as an FCO of trying to advance equity for people with disabilities. And we're growing that, trying to advance equity, as well, to underserved communities. So that passion I bring with me from time before and from all of the disproportionate impacts that I have seen on the various responses that I have had across my career.

Deanne Criswell:

I first met Marcie Roth, Marcie I met you before FEMA Corps and we met during the response to hurricane Sandy in New York city and during that time I was assigned as the individual assistance branch director. We had, I can't even remember, thousands of individuals that had self-identified as having a disability and we didn't have a mechanism in order to proactively reach out to these individuals to ensure that whatever that self-identified disability was, was being met. So I worked very closely with Marcie on that operation and we put in place a call center and contacted each person that had made that self-identification. It's those types of proactive measures that I think really make a big difference in how we reduce the barriers for individuals to access FEMA's programs. It's people first and that's the mantra that I continue to put forward with all of our staff is that if you put people first, then we deliver our programs equitably just by default.

Deanne Criswell:

We'll take care of people when they are our primary focus than there's no question that we're trying to do everything we can to reduce the barriers to access of the programs that we have. To that end I'd just like to say that we're really focused on trying to integrate the needs of people with disabilities across all of our programs and services and expanding this capacity across the agency and that our Office of Disability Integration and Coordination or ODIC, they really remained an active and integral part of this process, to not only improve FEMA's programs and how we help people with disabilities, but also to continue to help emergency managers around the country, improve their own programs. So you have my commitment to make sure that we are addressing the concerns that you mentioned as we opened up this call and concerns and questions that you may have as we continue to go through this. I may not get it right, right from the beginning, but I commit to you that we'll continue to work on this.

Deanne Criswell:

It's extremely important that we make sure again, that we are putting people first and that people with disabilities, your concerns are my concerns and I will do everything I can to make sure that we are addressing those. So Marcie with that, I'll be happy to answer any questions.

Marcie Roth:

Thank you very much, much appreciated Administrator Criswell and I'm going to turn back to Shaylin and German.

German Parodi:

This is German and again, thank you Administrator Criswell for joining us and all the panelists and all the attendees. We'll start going backwards, each panelists address specific issues, but over-arcingly, we have had as disability community nationwide, a disconnect with FEMA. We recognize this is not your fault, this is long ongoing, but how can the disability community have a direct line to FEMA when there are disability related discrimination in disaster response?

Deanne Criswell:

I think I'm still off mute here. We need to have that direct line and I would say that your first line is the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, they are the group that is continuously working to try to improve the way we deliver our programs, working with our emergency managers across the nation in order to help them improve their own delivery of their programs. This doesn't just happen at the federal level, this is a tiered response. This is a system, it's state, local, and federal that need to come together and make sure that we are addressing and updating our plans to make sure that they are addressing the needs of everybody in the community. So your first line is with the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination. You can also work through your regional offices, where they also have disability integration specialists assigned to every region across this country.

German Parodi:

This is German, thank you, Miss Criswell. We'll certainly be engaging with new. We have tried over years to engage with Miss Mastandrea and it has not been fruitful. We hope that with your leadership, we can engage and safe lives together. Misty Dion from Roads to Freedom, a center for independent living in Williamsport has been trying to access PAS through the agenda that was put out by FEMA in November of last year. She has tried to go through the --- and the state and no success, is there anyone at your office that she could be engaging with directly to accelerate this service?

Deanne Criswell:

I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you were asking for. DAS?

German Parodi:

Personal assistance services.

Deanne Criswell:

PAS?

German Parodi:

Yes.

Deanne Criswell:

So explain to me again exactly what it is we're trying to access here.

German Parodi:

Yes. FEMA put out a PAS personal assistance services addendum in November of last year. Explaining that centers for independent living could be contracting or the MOU with their locals to provide the PAS in sheltering -congregate or non-congregate. She applied and worked it out with an MOU with their county back in March and the they are still today is pushing back and not giving a direct answer. Who could she contact at your office to accelerate?

Deanne Criswell:

Can you tell me which region this is and then I'll certainly get with my regional administrator to follow up on that specific case.

German Parodi:

In region three.

Deanne Criswell:

Region three, okay. I'll absolutely get with my regional administrator to get some more specifics on where that's at, but again, we would provide the reimbursement to the private nonprofit, but I'll work with the regional administrator to get more specifics.

German Parodi:

Thank you, Deanne. I do want to ask you about accessibility for question 24, but I don't know if maybe want to add anything.

Misty Dion:

I just want to say, thank you for raising that, German. And Administrator Criswell if you can contact or if you can do anything to help centers for independent living, be able to directly bill from FEMA or PEMA for these emergency relocation it would allow us to be... I cover 30 counties. We would easily be able to relocate and provide services for people like Ebony. But if I have to go to 36 counties and bend two years to try to figure out how the application process. There's just too much disconnect, it's impossible. I can't. So please take that in mind. Thank you.

Deanne Criswell:

I appreciate that comment and again, we do have the ability to provide reimbursement to eligible private nonprofits. Again, I'll work specifically if this is still the region three issue on what the delay is, but if it's not an eligible private nonprofit, then that's really the mechanism where we need to be providing the reimbursement.

Misty Dion:

[inaudible 00:24:09] In my perspective, I think I could argue that we are eligible private nonprofit, and I think that's what we're getting frustrated with. There's a disconnect in understanding what a center for independent living is. Some are different. To me, our CIL follows that definition. So I'd be interested in talking more about than how we can get filled with you meet those definitions listed.

Marcie Roth:

This is Marcie and if I could just follow up. About a year and a half ago, we were meeting - the National Council on Disability, a federal agency, had convened a number of us to try and tackle some of these issues at the beginning of the pandemic. We raised our concerns about the eligible private nonprofits listed in the PAPPG, pages 44 and 45. They list sheltered workshops, they list adult daycare for people with disabilities, they list residential disability providers, and they exclude those community-based disability providers. When we were in this conversation a year and a half ago, long before many people with disabilities died from COVID, we were starting to make some real progress. It was agreed that this was a policy and not a legal definition and we had started the process of making those changes. Unfortunately, the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination put an end to those meetings and we have been unable. I believe we've talked about this before. We've been unable to address this issue and as a result, organizations like Misty's... Misty was sent to the state to PEMA, PEMA sent her to FEMA, FEMA sent her back to PEMA, PEMA sent her to her county, the county sent her back to PEMA, back to FEMA. Then as recently as I think last week, she was told she needed to work with her local folks again. Again, this is one of 36 counties that this particular organization is trying to save lives and the emergency protective measures are being denied when in fact they are being provided for people in other circumstances and entities with a very similar profile. So I hope that further clarifies that.

Deanne Criswell:

Thank you, Marcie, that's helpful and Misty, thank you. Again let me please just have an opportunity to get with my region three administrator, to get more specifics on this and we'll get back to you.

German Parodi:

This is German. We know were spending a little time with you today. We really appreciate your time. One last really critical piece that if we could take back and we could work on is question 24 in the FEMA individual assistance application. It has been worked on however, when people need accessibility accommodations to fill out the form, there is no mechanism to request this. This needs to be worked on as we expect and we know the disasters are going to keep increasing.

Deanne Criswell:

So let me just make sure that I'm clear because it's my understanding that we did work on the language of question 24, on 2019, rolled it out in 2020 but as what you're saying, that there's still additional work that needs to be done?

Marcie Roth:

There's two pieces. This is Marcie, I'll jump in. There's two pieces. The question 24 is still entirely inadequate, it only identifies certain disabilities and if you don't answer that question yes, if you don't see your disability in that wording, then you never get to the dropdown that enables you to identify other disability related losses or needs. Additionally, there is no way in the application form to request a reasonable modification in navigating the application process. Both of these have been called out by GAO, they've been called out by members of Congress and here we are three years later and there is still no way for people like Tom Olin in Texas, in the freezing cold, trying to get some assistance to request that accommodation. So I hope that further clarifies that.

Deanne Criswell:

Marcie thank you, it does. So again let me touch base with my team and get a better understanding of where we are at in our efforts to improve that and again we'll certainly get back with you, but I appreciate the additional explanation thanks that makes a lot more sense. I just want to stop here because I am at time and I have a hard stop, but I just wanted to say thank you all for taking the time today to meet with me, I appreciate listening to some of the concerns that you have, and I know that's not a comprehensive list of the concerns that you have. So we'll continue to engage in a dialogue with our FEMA leadership team at headquarters, as well as within our regions and you do have my commitment. You have my commitment to continue to address these concerns that you have so we can continually improve our programs, making sure that we have equal access to our programs for people with disabilities is incredibly important and we'll continue to work to try to improve that.

Marcie Roth:

This is Marcie. Shall we be continuing to reach out directly to you to continue in this process or to your chief of staff? What is the immediate next step? We have 122 people on the line, we have lots of Q&A what is it that we need to do at this point to move forward from this important conversation?

Deanne Criswell:

Again, I'm going to direct you to our Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, that is the main entry point. I understand that there's some frustration there and so if that's something where you're not getting what you need, I would suggest you reach out to my chief of staff and he'll help facilitate that conversation.

Marcie Roth:

Okay. We already have, we will again, and will we have a different experience this time when we reach out to ODIC?

Deanne Criswell:

I would think that ODIC is going to be your best bet for trying to move things forward, they understand my intent on how I want to make sure that we are providing our programs in a way that's accessible for all. Again, if you're not getting a different result, you can certainly reach out to my chief of staff as well. I appreciate everybody's time, I really do need to run to my next meeting right now as we are in the middle or the start of the peak of the hurricane season and I'm down here at the national hurricane center, focusing on this preparedness message as well.

Shaylin Sluzalis:

This is Shaylin. I want to thank you so much Administrator Criswell And thank you to all of our panelists who spoke today and to our over a hundred attendees that have been listening in and providing feedback and comments in the chat and Q&A. And we will be sending out a post-production of this meeting and hope to address some of the concerns and further ongoing dialogue around these ongoing systemic issues. So thank you all so much for joining us, I do want to mention that the partnership holds weekly national stakeholder calls at 3:00 PM Eastern time each Tuesday and I encourage everyone to join in with us there. We will be having a bit of a moment to reflect upon today's meeting and I encourage folks to reach out to us at directors@disasterstrategies.org. Again, thank you so much and thank you to FEMA for providing our accessibility accommodations today and thank you for all joining us. Stay safe everyone.