

**City of Whittier Emergency Services Assistant Ann-Marie Hayashi
Testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development,
Public Buildings and Emergency Management
Thursday, February 23, 2006
Whittier City Council Chambers, 13230 Penn Street, Whittier, CA**

Good morning, my name is Ann-Marie Hayashi. I'd like to welcome you to Whittier and thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of the City. I was asked to testify about what the federal government could have done better to assist the City of Whittier after the 1987 Whittier Narrows Earthquake.

A little background on the earthquake: there were actually two large earthquakes, the first on Thursday, Oct. 1st (magnitude 5.9), and a large aftershock on Sunday, Oct. 4th (magnitude 5.5). Together, the two quakes caused \$78 million in damages to Whittier houses and businesses.

In order to arrive at some recommendations as to how the federal government could have provided better assistance to the City of Whittier after the earthquake, I'd like to give a short background on Whittier's emergency preparedness activities prior to the earthquake. The assignment of emergency services coordinator had been given to the then-human resources director, who took the extra assignment very seriously and designed various full-scale disaster exercises for City employees and other agencies. There was no statewide standardized emergency management system yet, but Whittier and other California cities had been required by the state to adopt Emergency Services Ordinances and prepare emergency plans.

Compared to New Orleans with its different levels of government such as wards and townships, Whittier's governmental structure is simple – one City Council governs the City, assisted by supporting commissions and committees. By declaring a local emergency within four hours after the quake, our City Council was able to initiate the process for making financial grants and loans and other resources available to the citizens of our community.

There were several key issues, such as the need for many more building inspectors. The City was fortunate in many ways: 1) the state had registered volunteers to assist with building inspections, 2) the earthquake happened right after the annual convention of the International Conference of Building Officials, so the connections our building staff had made at the convention were fresh and resulted in many building officials offering assistance, 3) we have many large cities nearby and they also sent their building inspectors to supplement our small crew. Most important of all, there was not the widespread regional damage that Hurricane Katrina caused, so we had local resources available that would have been tied up in a regional disaster.

Adequate staffing was never an issue. City Hall and Police Department employees all reported for work, and the police were able to immediately cordon off the devastated Uptown area. City clean-up was facilitated by the fact that most of our residents were able to remain in their homes and therefore were able to do their own cleanup and even volunteer to assist others.

So what did the federal government do in 1987, and could things have been improved? The Whittier City Council and employees understood that disasters happen at the local level, so that's the level at which we need to be prepared. Key people who were in positions of responsibility at the time of the Whittier Narrows Earthquake agree that Whittier was not waiting for the federal government's assistance; we had no expectations for, and were not dependent upon, immediate federal response. Our former Building and Safety Director said, "There was no lack of assistance from FEMA, but we contacted FEMA only for advice, for example, on reimbursement parameters."

FEMA, state OES and the Small Business Administration did set up financial aid facilities in town, but the strongest recommendation for improvement I encountered was that the Disaster Assistance Center should have been set up sooner (it was set up ten days after the first earthquake, and only after much communication from City officials to our congressman as to the urgency of the matter.)

Other comments include:

- 1) FEMA should have sent at least a few representatives immediately after the earthquake to observe the damage and send firsthand comments back to D.C. The geographic distance meant that FEMA was very removed from the event and had a different perspective of the destruction that had occurred;

- 2) The Disaster Assistance Center was limited in terms of the type and levels of aid it could offer. Many senior citizens on fixed incomes did not qualify because of the compressed repayment periods and high minimum payment amounts;
- 3) There was poor coordination between funding sources (insurance companies and governmental assistance); and
- 4) Earthquake victims found the forms difficult to complete and desired more assistance from either volunteers or professionals. I would like to add that the FEMA representatives who did come to Whittier were very professional and extremely helpful.

As devastating as the Whittier Narrows Earthquake was for Whittier, the damage was intense in an area much smaller than the area affected by Hurricane Katrina. A more comparable situation would be an earthquake with widespread regional destruction, such as most of southern California. We would most assuredly be looking for more state and federal assistance in that situation, with all local resources stretched extremely thin. Such a regional earthquake would also cause widespread damage to major components of regional infrastructure, something that did not occur in 1987.

As mentioned earlier, even though shelters were necessary, the vast majority of Whittier residents were able to remain in their homes, return to their jobs, and clean up the rubble. They were able to volunteer in numbers to assist their fellow citizens.

All this is unlike what happened in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and would not necessarily be the case in a more massive, involved California earthquake.

I would like to thank the Members of the Subcommittee for inviting the City to testify, and thank your staff for their help. I am happy to answer any questions you have, or help find the answers for you at any time.