



**Testimony of Commissioner Zach Iscol  
New York City Department of Emergency Management  
Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 14, 2025**

Good morning Chair Ariola and members of the City Council. I am Zach Iscol, Commissioner of the New York City Emergency Management Department. I am joined today by First Deputy Commissioner Christina Farrell and Chief Financial Officer Christopher Blanco.

New York City Emergency Management has a big mission. We lead the development of the City's emergency plans and the coordination of multiagency responses to emergencies in New York City. We also educate the public about preparedness and advance long-term initiatives that reduce risk and increase the resiliency of New York City. Due to climate change, social and economic issues, international conflict, cyber threats, disease outbreaks, and aging infrastructure, new and worsening emergencies continue to threaten New York City. Bottom line, our job is to do everything we can to prevent emergencies, to ensure the city is prepared for them, to respond and manage them, and to then help the city – New Yorkers, businesses, communities, and neighborhoods – recover as quickly as possible.

Last year, NYCEM monitored 3,331 incidents from our Watch Command and responded to 786 planned events and no-notice emergencies across the city, deploying staff and equipment alongside our sister city, state, and federal agencies and private and non-profit sector partners. These included an extraordinary range of events and incidents. A 4.8-magnitude earthquake struck near New York City on April 5; a global IT outage involving CrowdStrike software impacted city governments, companies, and organizations around the world in July; and the fall of 2024 brought us the driest spell in the city's recorded history. The drought led to unprecedented challenges, including a two-week stretch between October and November in which the FDNY responded to 229 brush fires citywide—the highest amount in a two-week period in New York City history.

We activated and managed the City's Emergency Operations Center 19 times for severe weather, flooding, and other disruptions around the city, allowing us to coordinate with partners to address critical issues and maintain essential services. We also continued supporting the City's asylum seeker response operations as they evolved to meet changing needs throughout the year.

The people and communities of New York City are at the heart of what we do. In 2024, we launched the agency's first-ever citywide multilingual mailer to every residential address in the City to encourage all New Yorkers to sign up for Notify NYC, the City's official source for free emergency alerts. We introduced new emergency messaging channels on WhatsApp, Threads, and Facebook. We strengthened partnerships with youth, seniors, elected officials, and hard-to-reach communities by attending community meetings, supporting local events, offering hundreds of training sessions and Ready New York presentations, and engaging with local and ethnic media outlets. And our Community Emergency Response Team program welcomed 79 new volunteers last year, who now participate in community preparedness efforts and support first responders.

It is also our privilege to support other jurisdictions recovering from emergencies. NYCEM manages New York Task Force 1, one of 28 task forces across the country that make up the FEMA



National Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Response System. The task force is comprised of NYCEM, NYPD, and FDNY personnel who are fully trained and equipped to respond to natural, technological, and human-caused disasters. In 2024, NY-TF1 deployed to two incidents. In September, 46 personnel and two canines from NY-TF1 deployed to North Carolina following Hurricane Helene. The team conducted extensive searches of areas impacted by infrastructure collapse, downed trees, mudslides, and heavy flooding. In October, 81 personnel and four canines from NY-TF1 deployed to Orlando following Hurricane Milton. The team assisted searching for survivors in collapsed buildings, providing emergency medical care, and conducting water rescues.

We are also innovators in leveraging the latest technologies to enhance emergency preparedness and response. In collaboration with the Drone Task Force, NYCEM deployed drones to monitor shark activity on City beaches during the summer, culminating in a new Shark Protocol. We initiated a pilot program to use robotic devices to inspect infrastructure in hazardous conditions, such as compromised buildings. NYCEM is also exploring how generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can enhance preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.

NYCEM continues to coordinate the City's Recovery Working Group, which focuses on new priorities, including heat resilience strategies and temporary flood protection measures. In collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations, NYCEM facilitated a Post-Disaster Housing Recovery Focus Group to identify strategies for rapid post-disaster housing support. NYCEM connects City partners to FEMA Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) funding, a critical federal grant program focused on risk reduction, and provides the technical assistance needed to successfully apply for these programs, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in grant awards to support projects that make our city better prepared for future disasters.

And this is just a fraction of the work that New York City's emergency managers do.

Before detailing our budget, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the macro issues facing emergency management at this time, particularly funding. Federal grants make up the majority of NYCEM's budget, with 66% of our agency's budgeted headcount supported by federal funds. Over the last five years we have seen cuts to these federal grants nationally while also facing reductions in City funds. With falling funding and growing costs due to inflation and other economic factors, emergency managers across the country are being asked to do more with less.

I cannot think of any more critical investment in safeguarding New Yorkers during times of emergency than in the people who manage those emergencies. NYCEM staff are undercompensated compared to peers at similarly sized City agencies and their compensation does not account for the dual roles our staff must fill. In addition to their day-to-day responsibilities, staff rotate on 24/7 on-call teams, when they are responsible for immediately coordinating the City's response to an incident. This involved significant off-hours, weekend, and holiday work that is currently not accounted for in staff salaries. Our team has developed a comprehensive salary restructuring and advancement policy over the last year to provide career pathways and ensure we retain and grow the experience needed within the ranks of NYC Emergency Management to prepare for, respond to, and recover from future emergencies facing New Yorkers.



I want to take a minute and address another issue of pressing concern. The impact of cuts to federal spending and the federal workforce, especially at FEMA and other federal agencies we depend upon, should not be underestimated.

Across the country, emergency management 101 is that the local jurisdiction, whether a small town or county, a large city like New York, or a state, is in charge of managing an incident, but once that emergency exceeds their capabilities, they are able to turn to the state and then the federal government for support. Federal agencies provide unique expertise and capabilities that support local preparedness, response, recovery, surveillance, and mitigation. Agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), an irreplaceable partner for weather forecasting; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which conducts national disease surveillance; and the Federal Communications Commission, which supports wireless emergency alerts – just to name a few. We will need to ensure that we can properly prepare for and manage the consequences of emergencies in the absence of the fully capable federal agencies that have supported emergency management efforts over the past several decades.

Historically, when an incident occurs that exceeds local or state resources, the Federal government will involve all necessary department and agency capabilities and organize the Federal response, coordinated by FEMA. While all emergencies start and end at the local level, federal agencies play a dominant role in several disaster scenarios, including civil defense, nuclear accidents, bioterrorism, and counterterrorism. But we are in the midst of a period of major change for the U.S. emergency management system, and we must prepare for a world where we cannot depend on the historical structure of state and federal support before, during, or after emergencies.

I want to be clear, this concern predates the current administration. Over the last few years, New York City and many other cities and states across the country had to manage one of the largest humanitarian crises with little help from the federal government.

So today, I am announcing a 90-day process that NYCEM will commence immediately to assess our risk so we as a city can better understand what we will need to do to mitigate and prepare for our new political context. NYCEM will use this process to outline solutions and propose novel approaches to grow our local emergency management capacity. This will include working with regional partners, the private sector, and the state to fill the gaps created by federal cuts to budgets, workforce, and agencies we depend upon. We will proactively develop an emergency management system that will lead the city's efforts to be better prepared for the foreseeable and unknown threats that lie ahead.

With that, let me now provide a snapshot of our budget for next fiscal year.

Our projected total Fiscal Year 2026 City Tax Levy expense budget is \$79 million. We rely on our City Tax Levy expense budget to support the agency's administrative, technological and operational costs.

The projected Fiscal Year 2026 City Tax Levy Personnel Services budget is \$12.9 million, which supports the 82 personnel lines paid directly through our tax levy funds. This includes \$1.2 million



in funding for 16 staff members dedicated to working on increasing communication and services to people with disabilities, access and functional needs.

Our projected Fiscal Year 2026 Other Than Personnel Services budget is \$66 million, which includes \$44.5 million for the agency's asylum operations. The remaining \$21.5 million covers all agency operating and administrative costs. This budget includes a significant portion of nondiscretionary funding. These funds are designated to cover our warehouse lease, utilities, and telecommunications costs including the maintenance and operations of our Emergency Operations Center and backup facilities. This money also supports our fleet and all additional equipment, supplies, and materials needed to run the agency.

I would like to close by expressing my admiration for our dedicated emergency managers, who in addition to their day-to-day roles are also responsible for immediately coordinating the City's response to an incident. They accomplish both roles with exemplary professionalism and service to their city. I am honored to lead this agency and I know that the expert team at New York City Emergency Management will continue to set the model for what emergency management should be.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with the Council and I am happy to take your questions.