

Recovering from Hurricane Katrina: Responding to the Needs of Those Displaced Today and Tomorrow.

Senator Joe Lieberman

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(As Prepared for Delivery)

Madam Chairman, thanks for your leadership in convening this second hearing as part of the Committee's efforts to better understand the many challenges facing our country in the wake of hurricane Katrina

In the intervening time since our last hearing, parts of the Gulf Coast and Texas were ravaged a second time, by Hurricane Rita. And while it appears federal, state, and local governments performed better the second time around, clearly we have much work ahead to restore the public trust in government's ability to protect it from harm.

Texas officials moved quickly to start evacuations before Hurricane Rita hit and then worked to get many people without means of transportation out of the danger zone. Hospitals were better prepared for power outages and flooding. And New Orleans wisely, halted the flow of people back into the city until after the danger from Rita had passed.

The federal government was also better prepared. National Guard troops were positioned early. The Defense Department was on alert to provide humanitarian aid, medical care and logistical support to distribute food and water. And communications teams were deployed with satellite capabilities. This preparation paid off before, during, and after the storm.

But unfortunately, there were still problems, and lessons that must be learned for the future - such as the challenges of evacuating almost 3 million people from one city in a very short span of time. Gasoline supplies evaporated, stranding motorists on roadways and creating unnavigable traffic jams. Airport evacuations were handicapped by the sheer volume of travelers and because some airport employees did not get to work. Had this storm been larger, and had it hit Houston and Galveston head on, some of the problems we saw with Katrina might well have been repeated.

While we were better prepared for Rita than for Katrina, our emergency preparedness and response system is no where near what it has to be to protect the American people - whether from a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. We have a long way to go before the peoples' confidence will be restored.

Today, however, our attention turns once again to the immediate road forward. And, while several federal agencies have a role to play in the Gulf Coast recovery, the agency everyone is looking to is FEMA. Unfortunately, FEMA has not risen to the occasion.

Many reports indicate the relief and recovery effort has not been adequately planned, nor is it being effectively coordinated. This recovery is a massive organizational challenge. We have all seen the stories of promised assistance never arriving, or arriving at the wrong place, about frustrated volunteers willing to help caught up in webs of red tape and bureaucracy.

Weeks after the storm, FEMA representatives still have not contacted many affected communities; inspectors have not yet assessed the damage to an untold number

of homes, and thousands of evacuees have been unable to get through to the FEMA help lines.

In East Biloxi, Mississippi, for example, residents are trying to survive in houses that were flooded, full of mold, mildew and bacteria, without power or telephones. They have no jobs, no means of income, and no way to call for help. Madam Chairman, these are communities of mostly poor, minority residents – communities that were already left behind.

Perhaps the biggest issue for Katrina, and now Rita, evacuees is housing. My understanding is that FEMA plans to spend \$4 billion on trailers, but had spent just \$11.8 million as of September 21, as it struggled to find suitable locations and enough manufacturers to meet demand. At the same time, the prospect of housing thousands of people in makeshift trailer parks - or tent cities - without a clear vision for how to build permanent housing is extremely disturbing.

Finally, as FEMA and other agencies spend billions of dollars on the relief and recovery effort, we must beware of political favoritism, and the waste, fraud and abuse that occurs when contracts are let quickly, without competitive bidding, and without proper accountability. Last week, the Committee reported out legislation to create a special Inspector General to impose accountability for the billions of dollars in relief. We also passed legislation to create a Chief Financial Officer for the Katrina recovery effort. I hope the full Senate will act on these bills, as well as legislation we passed to address the emergency communications and interoperability issues, and provide more relief to Katrina victims, soon.

Today, we will hear from those on the front lines, providing solutions by helping thousands of evacuees through this unhappy period in their lives. I had hoped we would have been able to hear from newly appointed FEMA Director David Paulison to help us understand how FEMA's capabilities and resources compare to the job it must do. I know that Chief Paulison is extremely busy responding now to two hurricanes. But he alone is in a position to clarify where we are, and where we are going. And it is important that we hear from him soon.

I thank today's witnesses for being here. We owe a special debt to those around the country who have opened their hearts and their homes to their fellow Americans. You cannot do the job alone. You cannot be expected to sustain those citizens in need forever. I look forward to hearing from all of you how to map an effective course toward recovery.

Thank you.