

TESTIMONY FOR THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS, Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

Presented by the Honorable Mayson H. Foster, Mayor, City of Hammond,
Louisiana
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To the Committee:

When a disaster hits any area of our country, the affects are long-lived. They are long-lived not just from the area that has been immediately impacted, but for many other areas that feel the residual changes that occur. I thank you for the opportunity in allowing me to be here today to testify as to the affects of a disaster on our region, Hurricane Katrina, but this could just as easily have been any part of our country.

Much has been written as to how the City of New Orleans and other areas on the Gulf Coast and their immediate surrounding areas were devastated. The description of that devastation is beyond words and its full impact acknowledged only after personal visitation. I am sure that each of the panelists here today agree with the assessment that it was a horrible occurrence that we hope and pray does not happen again anywhere.

I am making this presentation on behalf of all small municipalities in Louisiana and elsewhere, particularly those with populations between 10,000 and 25,000. This group of cities is too large to be considered for funding as a "small city" but too small to be an entitlement city. While I represent the City of Hammond, Louisiana, there are hundreds if not thousands of municipalities that have experienced some of our trials and tribulations after any incident. I also represent the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain, which includes several small cities and several parishes that has suddenly experienced a great number of Southshore residents that have found it necessary to move.

Our city, the City of Hammond, is located some twenty-five miles directly north of New Orleans and is the first city above Lake Pontchartrain that has a measurable altitude above sea level, ours being 42 feet at the Hammond Northshore Regional Airport. Because of its geographic location, we found ourselves as the central focal point for many different activities immediately

after Hurricane Katrina. Our interstate highways, both Interstate 12 and Interstate 55, carried huge amounts of traffic entering the disaster area. The Hammond Northshore Regional Airport was tagged as one of the primary locations for disaster aircraft from helicopters to C-130 troop carriers and during the month of September, 2005, the airport recorded **15,000** take-offs and landings. We offloaded as many as 6,000 soldiers that were assigned to the disaster area. We acted as host city to National Guard troops that came from as far away as Pennsylvania.

Our city immediately responded to the needs of people either in shelters or assisting in the recovery efforts. Our shelters opened up to house thousands. One church, Mt. Vernon Missionary Baptist Church, remained as a shelter for forty-five days after the storm. One church, Woodland Park Baptist Church, provided over 10,000 meals per day—hot meals—to anyone seeking food. Another church, Crossgates Church in Robert, Louisiana, stopped construction on its new church and turned the shell of the sanctuary into a distribution center for food, water, and durable goods. The list goes on and one, but these are but a few examples of the generosity of the people of the Northshore.

We have been attempting to get people to come to Hammond and experience the good life here; we certainly did not expect to get such notice literally overnight.

In this hearing, we have been asked to focus on the challenges presented from this mass exodus to our area. While the challenges are many, the three that we have determined to be the most pressing are evident. They are:

Public Transportation needs

Housing needs

Coordination of Federal Benefits through FEMA and/or other agencies

Transportation.

Anyone that came to the Northshore area after Katrina, and for that matter anyone travelling the roads now, are familiar with what happened in terms of traffic congestion. Immediately after the storm, what is normally a

twenty-minute trip from Hammond to Covington along Interstate 12, a twenty-two mile distance, became a one hour ordeal. To get to Slidell 33 miles away was at least two hours; to Baton Rouge, 45 miles from the center of Hammond, must be allotted two hours. Today, the congestion has waned somewhat, but one must still plan for at least a half hour more than normal. Interstate 12, the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, Highway 190 in St. Tammany, and many other local roads are all grossly under constructed because of the added burden. There is very little movement to correct this inadequacy because the majority of funding for recovery is directed to the disaster area rather than to those areas which may be peripherally affected.

Many of the evacuees that moved to the Northshore came literally with the shirts on their backs and nothing more. A number of trailer housing developments popped up immediately to meet the demands of housing which will be discussed in the next section. A majority of these evacuees lost any mode of transportation which they may have owned and were moved from temporary shelters immediately after the storm to these "temporary units." Unlike the larger cities that are testifying here today, the Northshore has no public transportation. The evacuees found themselves stranded in the trailer park because they had no way to go to the store, to go back home to check on what was left of their lives, to go to the doctor, or to visit other areas.

The Tangipahoa Voluntary Council on Aging (TVCOA) has been designated in our Parish as the coordinating body for transportation, and they have done a miraculous job with the small resources they have on hand. Through grants that fund programs for the elderly, the TVCOA is able to provide services for this group; however in order to meet the 50% match requirements for federal dollars for transportation through the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, the TVCOA must charge a fee for all other riders. While the fee is nominal at \$7 per one-way trip, a \$14 fare disqualifies most of our evacuees from using this service.

The City of Hammond has recognized the need for transportation services and has entered into a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement with the TVCOA to provide two busses for standard routes. The City has budgeted \$36,000 for our commitment to transportation needs. While this is not a significant sum to the larger cities, it is a huge investment to us. In summary, a person's quality of life is based on his ability to be mobile, and without transportation, there is no mobility.

Policy Recommendations:

- (1) Upon declaration of disaster by the President of the United States, attention should be given to the peripheral areas of the disaster for immediate funding of infrastructure improvements.*
- (2) Upon declaration of disaster by the President of the United States, the President or the President's designee shall be given the authority to waive Regulations established by the National Highway Safety Board or other agencies to allow for expeditious construction of infrastructure.*
- (3) Upon declaration of disaster by the President of the United States, the U. S. Department of Transportation or other agency shall immediately provide transportation services to those areas directly affected and such other areas as are declared "emergency host areas" by the Governor of the state in which the disaster occurs, such services to include at a minimum bus transportation systems to areas established under disaster recovery declarations. Where necessary, funding should be provided to waive the 50% match for local agencies.*

Housing.

The City of Hammond has determined that in order to continue to attract business and industry to our city and to our parish, housing, particularly workforce housing, is an absolute necessity. Our city has moved forward with the completion of a Workforce Housing study which can be found in its totality at our website www.hammond.org. Our City is focusing on home ownership for hard working individuals, not just affordable housing owned by others. Home ownership gives a sense of belonging and has long-term, lasting effects on individuals and the community as a whole. The conclusions of this study are indicated below.

Through its research into the subject of workforce housing for the Hammond area in Tangipahoa Parish, the City of Hammond has concluded that there is a need for the construction of additional owner-occupied single-family housing for workforce

families. The population of the Hammond area has been increasing from two to 4.8 percent annually for at least the past ten years and is expected to continue growing in the foreseeable future. The local growth in jobs, especially those that would provide income for workforce families, is also increasing rapidly.

Many families that are within the income ranges defined in this report as workforce households can purchase housing units that are sold for moderate prices. However, because of the shortage of existing workforce housing for sale, and with very few units being constructed for sale in the range of \$70,000 to \$120,000, these families usually purchase mobile homes or rent a house or apartment. Approximately 48 percent of households in the City of Hammond rent their housing, much higher than the national average (approximately 35 percent). And almost 49 percent of housing permits issued in the Hammond area and Tangipahoa Parish are for placement of new and used mobile homes.

The City seeks methods of increasing homeownership through the development of permanent workforce housing. This study has estimated that there were approximately 8,838 households considered as workforce, by income, living in the greater Hammond area in 2006. With population growth rates estimated at two to 4.8 percent per year in that same area, a need for 126 to 282 units of workforce housing annually is a reasonable estimate of demand.

Although this need can be met through a combined use or construction of apartments, houses, mobile homes, town homes, and other forms of housing, the City of Hammond has chosen to advocate the need for increased single-family homeownership for the ever-increasing number of moderate-income workforce families. Construction of site-built or modular housing units that meet local and State housing codes and that are marketed for owner-occupancy, is a goal for the City of Hammond. In order to move forward toward this goal, the City lists five priorities in Section III-B of this report. These are:

- *Increase public awareness of the housing need,*
- *Develop credit and homeownership counseling as a method of helping to increase homeownership,*
- *Provide technical assistance to builders and developers who have a willingness to build workforce housing,*
- *Foster the development of a model workforce subdivision, and*
- *Provide incentives to increase the supply of single-family workforce housing for homeownership.*

As part of the strategy of increasing public awareness and providing technical assistance, the City of Hammond recommends that a **Workforce Housing Task Force** or Blue Ribbon Committee be formed, with its members appointed by the Mayor. The Task Force could be organized with a diverse group of locally-appointed volunteers who have an interest in and commitment to workforce housing and who will be willing to meet on a regular basis. Their objective could be to provide more detailed recommendations and strategies that will serve to encourage workforce housing and homeownership, as well as to work with the Mayor and 15 others in the City to bring

the recommendations to fruition. It is also recommended that the City and Workforce Housing Task Force be assisted by a housing consultant or City staff person that could help by providing data, information, and professional guidance, along with organizing meetings and public presentations.

From before the passing of Hurricane Katrina through today, accelerated population growth continues in the Hammond area, and the City is now at a critical juncture for managing this growth in a proactive, responsible manner with both present and future needs in mind. It is therefore recommended that a strategic workforce housing public information and awareness plan be developed in a timely manner for presentation to the City Council, local media, and other authorized organizations, with follow-on execution. The plan would include, but would not be limited to, the following components:

- *Specific directions for workforce housing as deemed necessary or desired by the City, to include goals, actions, and time frames for its development and completion,*
- *Partnerships with developers, lenders, and certain non-profits, such as Community Development Corporations (CDCs) and Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs),*
- *Provision of technical assistance, credit counseling, and homebuyer training, as required by the City and its partners or as desired by prospective developers, builders, and homebuyers,*
- *Grants and other financial assistance from the state and federal governments to assist developers and builders with design and construction, as well as to assist homebuyers with down-payments and mortgages, and*
- *Other components identified as appropriate or necessary by the City and its partners in the course of execution of the plan.*

In conclusion, this report demonstrates that despite the current housing situation, Hammond is poised for unprecedented growth and opportunities like none other in its history. As such, the City should ensure that the elements are in place to encourage this growth in a manageable way that leaves alternatives and options available for the future. This report serves as an originating document for guiding the City of Hammond in this direction, as well as for setting processes in motion for establishing one of its most important foundations –permanent housing that is accessible to the hardworking people of the community-at-large.

Hammond has taken the report and has actively moved toward development of workforce housing. We are in a Cooperative Endeavor Program with a non-profit agency that will allow the City of Hammond to donate approximately ten acres of surplus land to the non-profit, and the non-profit will build homes specifically designated as workforce housing. In some respects, this project is competing with other private developers who have applied for and received tax credits for affordable housing, while there is no such benefit to developers who wish to provide housing under home ownership

programs. With this system in place, rental property is more feasible to develop than ownership property.

Recommended Policy change: While the government and specifically the Office of Housing and Urban Development should be applauded for its efforts to provide affordable housing, we believe that more emphasis should be placed on home ownership. This could be accomplished through the appropriation of a portion of tax credits for defined workforce employees to be utilized for the purchase of a home. These tax credits could be acquired either by the homeowner, the developer of property designed for workforce housing, or by governmental units in cooperative endeavor agreements..

Coordination of Federal Benefits through FEMA and/or other agencies .

After a disaster, local governmental agencies look to the state and federal government for assistance. The public in general and the federal government observe the catastrophe scene since the majority of publicity is brought to that area, and probably rightfully so. Because of this, little attention is focused on those host communities that are absorbing the brunt of people relocation.

FEMA is the designated federal agency assigned to handle disasters. While much has been written as to this agency's handling of the Katrina and Rita disasters, this committee should again be made aware of how many different groups were contracted to represent "FEMA." Within the months after the storm, it really got to be a joke when someone came to the local government and announced that "I am from FEMA and I'm here to help." Our response was usually "Which FEMA do you represent?" Immediately after the disaster declaration, there were competing FEMA groups attempting to brandish their powers in order to garner the little resources that were available. In one instance, one FEMA contractor attempted to highjack a tanker truck full of aviation fuel from another contractor. This is only one small example of the

uncoordinated efforts by FEMA. Because of these uncoordinated efforts, local governments were having to complete paper work tasks two, three, or more times because of the confusion among the various contractors.

FEMA has actually prepared a FEMA Guidebook in preparation for a disaster entitled "FEMA; A Guide to the Disaster Declaration Process and Federal Disaster Assistance." Very little attention has been given to this guide, which in our opinion is well written and should be used by governmental bodies as the final authority for FEMA reimbursement. In this book, guidelines were established as to how a governmental body should conduct its business, including reimbursement guidelines for debris removal. On August 30, 2005, the City of Hammond began negotiations of contracts with independent haulers based on the guidelines set in the FEMA Guidelines. The haulers believed that the reimbursement was fair, the city believed it was fair, and the City of Hammond began debris removal on Sunday, September 4, 2005. Within 30 days, the City of Hammond was 90% clean. However, when worksheets were submitted for reimbursement, FEMA questioned many of the expenses although all city contracts were negotiated at FEMA rate and **at one third of the negotiated rates of other larger cities.**

Tangipahoa Parish President Gordon Burgess also agrees that the host communities be given more consideration as to Federal resources especially in terms of needed equipment and facilities because of the smaller communities immediately assuming the roles, responsibilities, and increased liabilities of larger communities while accommodating their displaced residents. Mr. Burgess points out that "as the preparation for the next major disaster/catastrophe continues, the planning and preparation needs are increasing while the emergency preparedness funding is steadily decreasing to an almost crippling state. "

Recommended Policy Changes:

(1) Upon declaration of a disaster, a FEMA or other federal government representative shall be assigned to each parish Office of Emergency Services within 72 hours following the declaration. Each assigned person should be committed to the Parish until such time as all worksheets are closed out.

(2) Local Governmental bodies should be allowed to use alternative solutions to recovery if such alternative solutions are found to be more efficient and at less expense than indicated in federal government policy guidelines.

(3) The FEMA Guidebook shall be recognized at the source document for reimbursement of Disaster Recovery Funding.

Conclusion:

We thank the committee for the time and effort in holding this hearing today. Because of your involvement, if disaster strikes again anywhere in our country, we will be more prepared to handle not just the tragedy itself, but those affected in the aftermath.