

November 30, 2007

Dear Senate Committee Members:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address your committee concerning the challenges placed on state as well as local government, concerning a large influx of evacuees during an event such as Hurricane Katrina and Rita.

As Sheriff of Iberia Parish, and the chairman of the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, I was uniquely positioned to understand the affect of a large number of people having evacuated into communities throughout the state. There were a number of parishes in South Louisiana that were affected by both Hurricanes but didn't necessarily receive dramatic and catastrophic property damages. These would include the parishes of St. Mary Parish, St. Martin, Iberia, Lafayette and East Baton Rouge. We were geographically positioned west of Katrina and east of Rita.

The State of Louisiana and all of its parishes collectively formulated evacuation, housing plans after Hurricane Andrew struck in 1992. The State of Louisiana's, emergency management coordinators, worked with many parishes particularly the ones noted to coordinate immediate temporary housing for tens of thousands of the state's displaced persons after Katrina and Rita. The dedication of schools, civic centers, courthouses and other public buildings were immediately mobilized and staffed in preparation for the thousands to come. The stressors experienced by security personnel, Red Cross volunteers, medical providers and local volunteers were physical but emotional problems started to become evident on or about the fifth day after the relocation of the evacuees. Food, clothing, and bedding shortages were experienced. The cleaning of the clothing and bedding also became an issue. Transportation problems were experienced and all collectively attributed to agitation and the beginnings of conflict between evacuees and volunteers. Outside communication to family and friends by evacuees was rendered virtually impossible due to the extensive movement of as many of 100,000 people state wide. The lack of an established network for posting information where evacuees were housed did not exist. It should be noted that a nationwide news network aided in attempting to remedy this problem. The news agency provided an email site where evacuees could post their temporary location. On or about the tenth day, administrators overseeing the operations of shelters were then faced with dealing with an emotional breakdown that started to occur for public safety and service providers. Working 18-hour days took a personal dramatic toll on these men and women. It was then imperative that a recruitment of additional volunteers was made. Without new and fresh people a collapse of services to those centers was imminent.

There was approximately two and one half weeks from the time Katrina hit Louisiana until the time Rita hit. It was just long enough for Katrina evacuees to be evacuated from their temporary shelter in those parishes noted above. This was a result of Hurricane Rita and her imminent strike to the western part of the state. The influx of an entirely new group of evacuees was experienced. This doubled the stress on all of the services provided at those centers.

Senator, you can imagine the difficulty in dealing with children, the elderly, and the medically impaired evacuees in such conditions. It should also be noted that law enforcement agencies really did not know who they were dealing with when it came to displaced criminals, and at least 650 sexual predators on the sex offender registry in the New Orleans' area.

In the last two years, in Louisiana, the State's operational response plan, to include local governments was examined and improved upon. It is imperative that in the future there is a quicker response from federal agencies on all levels to address the problems noted. Also needed would include a temporary medical provider system, mental health professionals, and assistance from military personnel to assist in local security measures in both metropolitan and rural areas once the proper documents and request have been made by the state and parishes affected.

The long-term affect of the influx of evacuees into many of the parishes in southern Louisiana is to be noted. The influx had an immediate dramatic affect on traffic, inadequate housing, drug trafficking and an increase in crime. In Iberia parish, within the first five months of the long-term placement, a shift in the people committing street level crimes to include burglaries, armed robberies, and drug dealings was established. The local criminals, in the community before the hurricanes, were in their own right displaced because of a number of newly introduced criminals and criminal networks that were attempting to take over the drug trade in that area. Physical and armed confrontations started to occur ending up in a number of shootings and homicides. The conflict of locals and evacuees went on for at least a year. Local police and sheriff's authorities had to employ new measures in an attempt to stop the violent conflict, which started to include innocent bi standers.

In an effort to provide laborers to help with the rebuilding efforts contributed to the crime problem as a number of workers from South and Central America introduced a new level of criminal organization as noted in the New Orleans area. The beginnings of a criminal network referred to as "MS 15" got its start and is now working its way throughout south Louisiana. The state of Louisiana's enforcement agencies working in conjunction with local law enforcement has had to adopt new measures of intelligence gathering and information sharing through improved communication and computer networks.

Additional training for temporary responders was necessary to instruct the officers on how to deal with the new face of crime. I believe very strongly that displacement of the thousands of people into areas that they were not familiar with was fertile ground for substance abuse and mental stressors placed on them. I have no actual data to document the increase in suicides and drug abuse but I am quite sure that this is occurring. In Louisiana we have very little resources when it comes to mental health services especially for the criminally insane. The federal government with its diverse resources could identify and assist each state's resources when it comes to the human problems noted. Federal agencies could address the need for more social services to address these problems to include health care, emotional stability and meeting the needs of the most basic human daily necessities as a top priority.

For the last seven years, I have witnessed a shift in federal priority when it comes to department of justice funding for law enforcement and social programming assistance. The catastrophic events surrounding Hurricane's Katrina and Rita tested every agency throughout the state when it came to manpower and equipment needed to perform their duties. In my opinion, the shifting from community policing and its concept to national and international terrorism, left a gapping hole in the number of first responders necessary to provide the services our citizens needed most.

I must note that when Hurricane Rita struck just two and one half weeks after Hurricane Katrina I noticed a very impressive difference in the response and attitude of U.S. military services. I believe that it was a direct result from the national criticism on the federal government by the national media. I would ask that what ever created the change in the philosophy and organization for the response to Hurricane Rita be a constant for future nation wide events.

Sheriff Sid Hebert,  
Sheriff of Iberia Parish