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Testimony before the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery
December 3, 2007

Good afternoon. I'm Kip Holden, Mayor-President of East Baton Rouge Parish, and I would like to welcome the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery to Baton Rouge for his hearing. I would especially like to take this opportunity to thank my good friend Senator Mary Landrieu for convening this field hearing to listen to the unique perspectives of cities that hosted those whose lives were devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

While the impact on our communities was not the devastation our neighbors to the south suffered, our own resources were nevertheless strained and our lives impacted in ways that had never been experienced before in history. On behalf of the citizens of East Baton Rouge Parish, I'd like to thank you for hearing from us and for sharing this information with the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. It is our hope that our government will take measures to assure us all that we never again experience the response we saw from the federal government in the aftermath of the hurricanes that hit south Louisiana in 2005.

If you will permit me to take you back for a minute to that time, I will attempt to relate to you the impact of these storm events on East Baton Rouge Parish.

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, an estimated 250,000 people sought shelter in our city of Baton Rouge. The results were a tremendous strain on housing, traffic, schools, hospitals and service providers.

From the standpoint of our administration, we balanced the needs of a vibrant capital city with aggressive plans for development and revitalization of our downtown and riverfront, with the need to be compassionate neighbors to a quarter million traumatized and displaced citizens.

To fully understand the impact of this population influx on our city, consider these numbers:

>The Volunteers of American served 1,153 in July of 2005; and 3,750 in November.

>The Society of St. Vincent de Paul saw the number of meals they serve grow from 13,500 per month to 45,000 in September. By January of 2006, that number had stabilized around 18,000.

>The need for services such as a “safe house” increased because of incoming mental health patients among the displaced – people who were no longer taking their prescription medicines, those with alcohol or substance abuse problems, individuals suffering from emotional stress from the loss of lives and property and separation from family members.

>Our homeless population increased from around 1800 to nearly 8,000 in one month, with a significant number of those school children.

Providing Affordable Housing

One option we have pursued in Baton Rouge to put more affordable housing stock into the market has been to work with non-profit developers and the faith-based community to provide grants and low interest housing loans.

HUD has become a major partner in our effort to address our housing needs, and I have worked with Secretary Alphonso Jackson to bring HUD representatives in for workshops with local groups.

Our non-profit organizations have expanded their services, and new non-profits have opened since the hurricanes.

The biggest hindrance has been the up-front costs of bringing housing up to specifications, which is a large expense before a funding stream is realized.

To address our housing needs, we did the following:

>Brought HUD officials together with private developers, the faith community and non-profits to expedite affordable housing development.

>Worked with Habitat for Humanity to build a record number of new homes.

>Utilized housing tax credits through the Louisiana Housing Finance Authority

>Explored the pre-fab housing market to provide options

Our experience was that the CDBG grants are the most efficient manner of providing assistance to cities dealing with the aftermath of a major disaster. Our parish has a consolidated plan in place for using these funds; however, federal dollars could be more effective if provided with greater flexibility on how those are spent.

FEMA spends hundreds of millions of dollars to address housing problems with temporary solutions such as travel trailers; yet they are hesitant to spend money repairing or rehabbing apartments or housing to bring them back online and provide more permanent solutions.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita forced us to take a look at updating some of the federal guidelines that no longer serve us well in catastrophic events. I spoke at a conference of the American Bar Association last year and we discussed that the HUD definition of homeless does not cover those living in FEMA trailers or FEMA-provided hotel rooms. Many of these people were either homeless or near homeless before the storm, and if they are included, their numbers provide a more realistic picture of our homeless population. If we could get these people included in the guidelines, they may be eligible for HUD funded housing and services to assist them in getting back on their feet.

I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you that those of us who were on the frontline in the disaster response following Hurricane Katrina believe the Stafford Act should be updated in light of the government response.

As President Bush acknowledged from his speech in Jackson Square, "the system....at every level of government....was not well coordinated....and was overwhelmed in the first few days."

A true national preparedness system should ensure that all levels of government effectively work together to keep the American people safe and secure at home. As the world saw on television, that wasn't the case in Louisiana.

Some have suggested that we need a national framework for disaster response, and a requirement that local and state governments develop emergency plans within the framework. Others have suggested we need a separate plan that applies to major natural disasters of the size the Gulf Coast experienced.

My experience is that the Stafford Act is too restrictive in limiting funding to areas that have suffered physical damage. Our city was significantly affected by a tremendous population shift, with our service providers strained to serve human needs. Yet we are faced with fighting for funds because we have for the most part recovered from the physical damage but still face serious problems caused by the aftermath.

Before Katrina and Rita, providing adequate housing for our community was a challenge. After the hurricanes, it became an urgent need.

Transportation & Transit

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Baton Rouge area experienced traffic growth we had not projected for 25 years. For a capital city that was already experiencing severe traffic congestion, the influx of a displaced population resulted in traffic counts that showed a 35- to 40-percent increase in traffic, with frequent gridlock on our surface streets.

With our interstate system serving as a major evacuation route, traffic around Baton Rouge quite literally ground to a halt.

Despite the increased population, these traffic problems actually resulted in a negative impact on many small businesses, with the traffic leading to interruption of supplies, loss of sales and loss of customers from the most seriously impacted areas.

We have not waited for the federal government to help solve this problem. Only two months after Hurricane Katrina, the voters of East Baton Rouge Parish passed our first bond election in 40 years to fund a "Green Light Program" of street improvements that address short and long term traffic solutions.

In May of this year, we kicked off a regional effort to build the Baton Rouge Loop, a traffic loop supported by the parish leadership of five surrounding parishes that is being designed to relieve traffic congestion. Through new financing options and legislation that will allow public-private partnerships and tolls for financing alternatives, we are taking an exciting new regional approach to transportation planning.

Providing Medical Response

While the volunteer medical response to victims of Hurricane Katrina was unprecedented in Red Cross history, it was severely hindered by inadequate communications, limited resources and red tape. Medical volunteers from all over the world began arriving in Baton Rouge because of an inability to get through to anyone to determine our needs and a lack of a system for deploying medical volunteers and much needed supplies.

Pre-positioned federal assets critical to the operations of our area hospitals were never received. Resources from the Strategic National Stockpile, despite our requests, were never locally deployed and were derailed due to paperwork issues.

Area hospitals were faced with serious reimbursement needs for depleted resources. Many of the patients treated at our area hospitals were uninsured and underinsured, so the impact on our hospitals was tremendous.

Conclusion

Our recommendations for improving the level of emergency response following a major catastrophic event:

>Address the shortcomings of the Stafford Act to provide greater flexibility in providing support to host cities that are impacted by the influx of evacuees from a major disaster.

>Provide a single point of entry for those who are homeless to streamline access to food, shelter, job services and access to health care; and safe havens for those who are in need of substance abuse treatment or mental health services.

> Help us build healthy communities where public transportation meets the needs of the community; smart growth strategies are utilized to provide mixed income housing options with healthcare and recreational opportunities located nearby; and where we encourage public-private partnerships to rehabilitate old properties to bring them back online.

To all those who found shelter in Baton Rouge, our message was simple: Our hearts went out to them; our homes opened to them; our businesses served them; our city cared for them.

This is the legacy of the people of Baton Rouge.

But our city was impacted, also. Our resources were depleted; our hospitals and schools overwhelmed; our businesses impacted.

As you analyze the role and needs of host communities in the wake of major disasters and catastrophes, I urge you to consider the different toll we face and respectfully ask that you find ways to improve the emergency response our citizens profoundly deserve.