

**Testimony of Hon. Robert V. Massengill**

**Mayor, Brookhaven, Mississippi**

**Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

**September 28, 2005**

**Testimony Regarding Impact from Hurricane Katrina on our Community**

The City of Brookhaven, Mississippi (population 13,000) is located on Interstate 55 and U. S. Highways 84 and 51, 123 miles north of New Orleans and 135 miles northwest of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Brookhaven had experienced only minimal damage from hurricanes, such as Camille in 1969. On Saturday, August 27, 2005, City and Lincoln County officials met with the local Civil Defense Director to discuss the tracking of Katrina and the likelihood that the community would be affected.

By early Sunday afternoon, August 28<sup>th</sup> evacuees had begun arriving in the city. All motels were immediately filled and churches, which served as shelters, were beginning to be filled. Six such shelters were set up in the city and another two in the surrounding area. The shelters accommodated up to 1600 evacuees at the peak while another 1200-1500 people stayed in motels or with family or friends. All evacuees at church shelters were signed in by Red Cross personnel upon arrival. Red Cross provided some personnel and assistance, but meals have been prepared and served by church members. Local restaurants have been extremely generous in helping provide meals as have other churches not serving as shelters. Other churches not serving as shelters have been gracious in also preparing meals.

All evacuees were welcomed by church members and were made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. Most of these evacuees were from the greater New Orleans area, due in a large part to the fact that I-55, a major route out of that city, was converted into four-lane north-bound traffic during evacuation. Brookhaven Recreation Department's main building was made into a shelter for power company personnel. The city and county Multi-Use Building housed similar personnel.

During the day Monday, August 29<sup>th</sup> the community received wind gusts of up to 85 MPH and had several hours of sustained winds of 50+ MPH. Power was lost throughout the entire community by mid-morning, as several hundred trees fell throughout the day. (My personal estimate is that over 750 trees were down throughout the city.) Approximately 20-25 homes were struck by trees with at least one-half of these receiving

considerable damage, including 6-8 being totally destroyed. Brookhaven and Lincoln County, which also sustained a complete loss of power due to fallen trees, were both indeed fortunate, as there were no lives lost nor were there any serious injuries due to the hurricane.

With no power, evacuees and residents were unable to obtain much outside information; thus the severity of the damage to other areas was not known until later that week. Recognizing the need, the city workers began opening streets and roads late Monday, as nearly all were closed due to fallen trees. They continued this function throughout the day Tuesday and Wednesday. By the weekend traffic was able to travel throughout the community. I met with the power company to help determine priorities within the city and they began working to restore power almost immediately. The following priorities received prompt attention:

- First, the local hospital.
- Second, the streets on which major retail stores are located.
- Third, the city's water wells.

The hospital operated by generator power Monday and part of Tuesday, but had power restored by late Tuesday. U. S. Highway 51 and Brookway Boulevard also received power by late Tuesday. This enabled consumers to shop at the Wal-Mart SuperCenter, Home Depot, and other retail stores, including convenience stores and other gas retailers. The city's water supply is obtained from eight water wells, four of which are located in a relatively small geographic area. All eight wells lost power on Monday morning, but two continued to operate on generator power. These ancient generators were "nursed" throughout the day and night by the city's committed Water Department personnel. Funds to purchase new generators for the wells and lift station will be a priority.

By mid-day Wednesday, August 31<sup>st</sup> power was restored to four wells and by late Thursday power had been restored to all eight wells. I went on the radio to advise the people that our water supply was safe and kept people informed periodically throughout the week. My intent was not only to inform but to calm the fears of the community and evacuees. Water was never lost for city residents nor were they required to boil water.

City, county, law enforcement, utility company, and civil defense personnel met daily for three weeks for updates, which enabled us to have an area-wide perspective of needs. National Guard troops were brought in to help distribute ice, water and meals and to work with law enforcement personnel in primarily directing heavy traffic caused by extremely long lines at gas pumps. At no time was a curfew imposed due to the commitment and capability of the city's police force.

Within two weeks of the hurricane, power was restored to all residences and businesses in the city. All within the county received power within two-and-a-half weeks. Obviously, most families lost the contents of their refrigerator and freezer.

During the past three weeks the city crews picked up approximately 10,000 cubic yards of vegetative debris (trees, limbs, etc.). The Corp of Engineers currently is overseeing the pickup of the remainder, which will amount to at least 100,000 additional cubic yards. The Corp has been extremely competent and professional in their approach to the removal of debris.

Many of the evacuees have left the shelters, some to return home while others have found local residences. Still others have relocated elsewhere to be with family or friends. Presently there are approximately 200 evacuees from Katrina still in shelters. The six local shelters have been consolidated into four and were to be reduced to two or three within the next week. However, these shelters all have new evacuees due to Hurricane Rita. No area church had ever served as a shelter for more than three or four days, but the ones still functioning are now into their fifth week. The volunteers involved are to be truly commended for this showing of love, concern, and compassion.

Outside volunteers have flooded our area with the desire to help and to serve others. I have met and talked with Red Cross volunteers from at least fifteen states. I have talked with medical support personnel from Indiana and New York State. Brookhaven has become the "sister city" of Park City, Illinois, whose mayor accompanied five others in bringing funds and goods to us. The ambulance service of Brookhaven, NY adopted our community, arriving two weeks ago with the willingness to do whatever was needed.

While Brookhaven was hit harder than ever before and while some in our community suffered a significant loss, most of us were merely inconvenienced. We soon realized that most of those not far from us had their lives changed. Needless to say, I am extremely proud of the people of Brookhaven for helping out like we did during this almost overwhelming crisis.

### **Current & Future Needs of the Survivors and Plans for the Future for Them and for Our Community:**

First of all, let me say that the survivors (or evacuees) were overwhelmed with the love they were shown, primarily by the members of churches which served as shelters. Their physical needs were met and it has been heartwarming to see how they have responded by cleaning, by cooking, and by handling other daily tasks at the shelters. They wanted to show their appreciation for what has been done for them by helping out in anyway they could. For instance, this past week a Jordanian family who owned a taxi service in New Orleans prepared the meal for all evacuees at Faith Presbyterian Church.

The most pressing physical needs of the evacuees have been met as they have reasonably good accommodations, three good meals a day, cash from the Red Cross, and hope of soon having individual assistance from FEMA. I have been to each shelter regularly and have talked with families and individuals. The following is a summary of the thoughts of most of the evacuees:

- They feel that they have been forgotten or ignored as more attention has been given to those nearer the harder struck areas.
- They feel the government has been slow to respond.
- They feel that FEMA's representatives who tell them they will hear back from them the next day, don't give them a response for over a week, if at all.
- Prior to the new evacuees entering the shelters due to Hurricane Rita, only 220 Katrina evacuees remain. This represents 71 family units. Of these 71 families 35 could return to their homes if they had a trailer or camper in which to stay while working on their damaged home. This is their main need and primary request. Actually, it is the only request of one-half of the families.
- Still other concerns and needs revolve around employment. Many questions are unanswered regarding jobs, as some of their employers have been wiped out.

Plans for the future needs for the evacuees deal with the above and with the following, as well:

- How can disastrous situations such as this best be dealt with in the future? If we fail to learn lessons from Katrina and Rita we are indeed poor planners.
- Should evacuees be allowed to return to areas that are still unsafe? To me this is a "no brainer", as they should not be allowed in unsafe areas, especially areas without safe streets, water, sewer, power and police protection.
- What can be expected regarding employment in areas destroyed by catastrophes such as this?
- The list of unanswered questions goes on and on.

Plans for the communities involved include the following:

- How can smaller communities such as ours best prepare for future events such as this? Obviously we should learn from this catastrophe and have more detailed plans for future events such as this.
- How can FEMA be more readily accessible to communities struck by disasters? It is easy to criticize FEMA, but this organization is understaffed for an event of this magnitude.
- How can evacuees be best housed, fed, and cared for, both for the short-term and the long-term? Locally the responsibility is handled by the area churches, but better coordination efforts are an absolute necessity.
- Federal funds will be made available for the areas hardest hit, but will Federal funds be made available for communities not as devastated, but which still suffered loss? Since we have been declared a disaster area funds have been made available, but no individual assistance office has been set up locally so the evacuees and local residents who suffered a loss are concerned.
- How can efforts best be coordinated (FEMA, Red Cross, other relief efforts) to insure that the "most bang for the buck" is received on a timely basis? This is one of the most pressing needs and concerns as failures abound. This will be a portion of our city's plan for the future.

- Are there checks and balances to insure that funds are properly distributed and on a most-needed basis? The distribution of Red Cross checks was handled poorly. While not a government operation improvements definitely are needed.
- How much of the relief effort is to be funded by local or national charities or by individuals, compared with how much is to be funded by Federal, State, and local governments? I don't propose to have a quick, easy answer to this complex question.

Part of my job is to help answer questions such as these in greater detail for my community.

Obviously, I have a first-hand perspective of the recent hurricane. I have seen how the caring people of a community which has been somewhat affected have opened their churches, their homes, their pocket books, and especially their hearts to those less fortunate. Even with a loss of power as well as damage and debris throughout the city, our local people still helped those whose need was greater than their own. Our community has responded well to this challenge. We have learned valuable lessons that should serve us well in the future. The following are key elements to handling the next challenge even better than this one:

- **Proper planning ahead of time**
- **Open lines of communication**
- **Leadership**

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to be with you. Thank you for your concern, your interest, and your desire to develop ways to better handle disasters such as this in the future.