

The Response Continues



As relief continues to flood into the Gulf Coast, Congress considers ways to improve disaster response

By Beverly Bell

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ore than two months after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it continues to exert its strength. Not only did the nation's costliest hurricane create the ongoing demand for resources to aid in the relief, but it also spurred activity in Congress with hearings on the response effort, the recovery's financing and how to improve the nation's response to future disasters.

Record Response Continues

No response effort rivals that of Hurricane Katrina. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a state-to-state mutual aid agreement that allows support across state lines following a disaster, has deployed much of the personnel and equipment. This includes approximately 52,000 emergency response professionals and National Guardsmen, as well as other resources, totaling more than \$700 million in aid. Add to that 5000 people and \$60 million in assistance to the Hurricane Rita response, and EMAC is handling a deployment that shatters previous records. Through the compact, 48 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have provided assistance. Resources have covered a wide range of disciplines such as law enforcement, firefighting, health and medical and transportation

Congress Looks for Answers

Trying to remedy failures with the response to Hurricane Katrina, Congress has held at least 40 committee and subcommittee hearings. These have included the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee; Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee; Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee; and the Environment and Public Works Committee. In the House, the Homeland Security Committee has met, along with Transportation, Appropriations, Energy and Commerce and others.

Members of Congress have heard from Michael Brown, the former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Richard Skinner, the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Gov. Kathleen Blanco of Louisiana and Henry J. Rodriguez, Jr., president of St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana, which was decimated by Katrina. Representatives from victim relief organizations have testified, along with health officials, educators and infrastructure experts. The sheer breadth of topics and witnesses underscores the scope of the disaster.

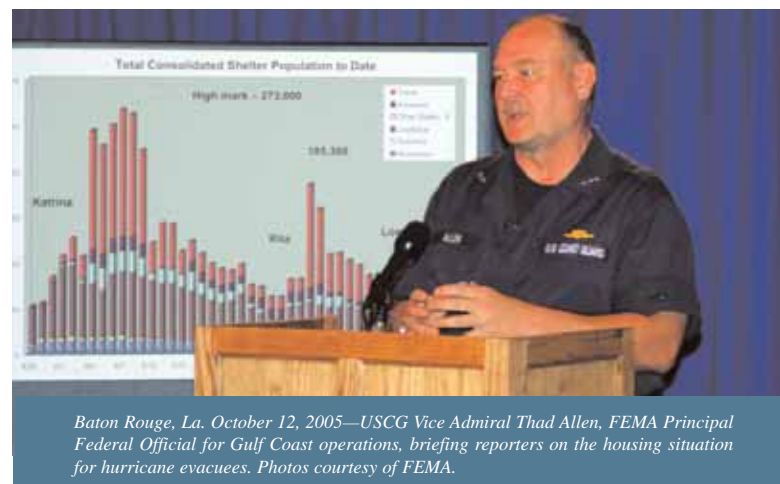
The Deterioration of FEMA

The National Emergency Management Association, a CSG affiliate, which also administers EMAC, has taken an active role in addressing some of the problems with the Hurricane Katrina response. In September, NEMA published its recommendations for the selection process and qualifications of the new FEMA director, stressing that the post should go to someone with significant emergency management experience and a direct reporting line to the president.

In October, Albert Ashwood, NEMA vice president, testified before Congress with "A Tale of Two FEMAs." He explained that the FEMA of the mid to late 1990s had been more than up to the task of disaster management, successfully responding to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Oklahoma City federal building bombing and Hurricane Floyd in 1999. However, after it was absorbed into the bureaucratic maze of the Department of

Homeland Security, suffered budget cuts and a steady exodus of knowledgeable people, the agency no longer possesses the resources or experience to handle natural or manmade disasters.

"Unfortunately, we have stood by and watched as FEMA has become a shell of its former self," Ashwood said. He explained that FEMA is understaffed at headquarters and on the regional level. "The regional offices are the direct line of communication for state and local governments to tap into federal resources," Ashwood said. Without adequate staff, FEMA cannot fulfill its congressionally mandated mission of disaster relief.



Baton Rouge, La. October 12, 2005—USCG Vice Admiral Thad Allen, FEMA Principal Federal Official for Gulf Coast operations, briefing reporters on the housing situation for hurricane evacuees. Photos courtesy of FEMA.

Ashwood's testimony was consistent with NEMA's policy position. In July 2005, the association sent a letter to congressional leadership critical of the proposed reorganization of DHS. The letter warned that the restructuring, which took all natural disaster preparedness away from FEMA and lacked a focus on an all-hazards approach, would pose serious risks to the country if disaster struck. On August 21, NEMA leadership met with DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff and Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson, expressing the same concerns. Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast eight days later.

DHS Reorganization—and More FEMA Budget Cuts—Go Forward

Despite complaints about the continued evisceration of FEMA, and insufficient federal funding to states for disaster response, DHS is moving forward with its plans to reorganize.

Congress approved the restructuring in October, along with the \$30.8 billion DHS budget for fiscal year 2006. This represents a 4 percent increase for the department, but a 10 percent decrease for FEMA, further undermining funding for disaster response and mitigation programs designed to reduce future damage from earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters. Border security received the lion's share of the additional money.

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