



Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina: *Louisiana's Perspective on Emergency Management*

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INTRODUCTION

There are emergencies. There are disasters. And there are catastrophes. While most states are experienced in dealing with a wide range of emergencies and even disasters, hurricane Katrina and the inundation of New Orleans underscore the need to go beyond the traditional boundaries of emergency preparedness and to prepare to deal with catastrophes as well. Changing weather patterns and the threat of major earthquakes, terrorist attacks and pandemics may threaten the health and safety of tens or hundreds of thousands of people for weeks and months at a time. Governors and state governments will play a critical role and need to be prepared.

This management brief was prepared at the request of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and is based on a series of interviews with Governor Blanco and key officials in Louisiana. It highlights some of the lessons learned as that state dealt with hurricanes Katrina and Rita and their aftermath. Many of these lessons are not new, but serve to underscore advice given to governors in the past. Others suggest the need to address specific issues that may arise if a state confronts a crisis of a catastrophic proportion.

This management brief will be of particular interest to newly elected governors and their staff who must be prepared to respond to an emergency immediately upon assuming office.

BACKGROUND

On Friday afternoon, August 26, 2005, the path of Hurricane Katrina made a dramatic westward shift. New Orleans became the projected target for a direct hit by a then Category 5 hurricane. Over 1.3 million people evacuated the southeastern region of Louisiana within 36 hours. On Monday, August 29, 2005, at 6:10 a.m., Katrina made landfall at the southern tip of Louisiana. Tidal surge flooded St. Bernard and Plaquemines, the parishes located south of New Orleans. The surge stretched eastward through Mississippi where it was recorded as high as 30 feet at Bay St. Louis, some 60 miles from New Orleans. In all, Katrina affected 90,000 square miles of land. Multiple levees designed to protect urban New Orleans breached on Monday morning, August 29, 2005. As 80% of the City of New Orleans was inundated with flood water, Louisiana lost 25% of its economy.

Property damage in Louisiana is estimated at \$100 billion dollars. The Katrina catastrophe destroyed 127,000 homes and severely damaged 240,000 more. To date, 400,000 people have not returned to the region. Over 240,000 abandoned automobiles have been identified. Debris removal will continue well past the one year anniversary of the storm. With \$43 billion in cost incurred by FEMA, Katrina is the costliest disaster ever to strike American soil. By contrast, the cost of the 2001 World Trade Center disaster was \$7.4 Billion, the 1994 Northridge Earthquake cost \$7 billion, and 1992's Hurricane Andrew cost \$1.8 billion. Three weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana suffered a second catastrophic event, when Hurricane Rita struck the

southwestern part of Louisiana, destroying Cameron Parish and severely crippling Calcasieu and Vermilion Parishes. Katrina and Rita involved the largest ever deployment of state resources through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). To date, some 1007 EMAC missions have been recorded. In a “normal” disaster, 50 EMAC missions are logged on average.

LESSONS LEARNED

State government plays a critical role in preparing for and responding to a major emergency. Experience in responding to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the underlying soundness of Louisiana’s emergency response capacity, but also suggested a number of lessons that Louisiana is incorporating in its own planning for the future and which may be of value to other governors as they review and update their own plans.

Understand the Risks that May Confront Your State

There is a tendency for emergency preparedness to focus on the most common and immediate threat. However, by their very nature catastrophes are infrequent events and the potential for catastrophe may need to play a greater role in future planning.

Lessons Learned

- Focus additional attention on comprehensive risk assessment, including an assessment of threats associated with the potential failure of protective systems such as dams and levees and on the impact of both short and long term disruptions of critical infrastructure such as transportation, communications, electricity, sewerage and water supply.
- Assess and plan for the need to provide both housing and critical public services to large numbers of evacuees for extended periods of time.

Make Emergency Preparedness a Gubernatorial Priority

The successful response to a major disaster or catastrophe involves all levels of government and the coordination and collaboration of a wide array of government programs and services. The governor must play a key role in ensuring that the key players are active participants in the planning process and that the state has allocated the resources needed to develop, maintain and test emergency plans on an ongoing basis.

Lessons Learned

- Make emergency preparedness a gubernatorial priority. Signal the importance of emergency preparedness by taking an active role in reviewing plans and mandating full cooperation by state agencies. Establish a close working relationship with the governor’s homeland security advisor and other key emergency preparedness staff and clearly define the responsibilities and authority of those positions.
- Take an active role in the development of the state’s emergency preparedness system. Recognize that the governor and the governor’s staff may be in a unique position to test assumptions, assess the availability of state resources, identify political and communication risks and encourage innovation.

- Recognize the importance of maintaining and testing emergency response plans on a regular basis and secure legislative approval for the resources needed for those tasks.
- Make sure that state emergency plans recognize the potential scope and duration of the need for emergency shelter and relocated public facilities and be prepared to secure legislative approval for the resources needed to ensure the development of dual use facilities in areas to which evacuees will be moved.
- Focus additional attention on communications capacity – operability, interoperability, redundancy and alternative systems
- Search for opportunities to signal the importance of emergency preparedness and cooperation and collaboration between state government and localities and among localities. Establish direct lines of communications for use during an emergency.
- Include other key elected officials such as the State Attorney General and the State Comptroller or Auditor in the emergency preparedness planning process.

Learn from the Experience of Others

All levels of government are planning for and responding to emergencies on a continuing basis. This experience provides valuable insights that should be examined and incorporated into the state's ongoing process of emergency preparedness planning.

Lessons Learned

- Make certain that your emergency planners are using the experience in other states to better identify the potential for catastrophic events and the likely impact of those events.
- Encourage your emergency planners to talk with their colleagues in states that have experienced catastrophic events and to make certain that they are incorporating the lessons learned in state plans.
- Identify and make contingent relationships with other state staff and/or consultants who have experience in emergency management and be prepared to call on those staff if the scope of the event requires it.

Make Certain that Gubernatorial Staff Understand their Roles

Gubernatorial staff will have a number of important roles to play during the state's response to a major disaster or emergency. Some like the governor's communication staff and legal counsel may have assigned roles in the response plan itself. Other may continue in their role of providing personal support for the governor. It is important; however, that staff understand the state's emergency response structure and minimize their unplanned involvement in emergency operations per se. A strong and coordinated chain of command is critical to a successful response.

Lessons Learned

- Clearly define the role of gubernatorial staff during an emergency, making certain to differentiate between staff responsibilities to support the governor and responsibility for the actual management of emergency operations.
- Make certain that governor's staff understand their role during an emergency. Pay particular attention to the role of the governor's counsel relating to emergency declarations and the clarification of executive authority during a crisis. Understand the nature of the decisions that the governor may be called upon to make during an emergency and be prepared to make those decisions quickly. Include the state attorney general in the planning process.

Be Prepared to Serve as Chief Communicator During a Crisis

During a major disaster or catastrophe the media, the public and the political leadership will rely on the governor as the primary source of information on the nature of the event, needed public response and the status of relief and recovery efforts. The challenge is exacerbated as the scope of an event may undercut normal communication channels and draw the attention of national and international media.

Lessons Learned

- Recognize the pivotal communications role that the governor will play during an emergency and be prepared to balance the public's demand for information and a sense of the nature of government's response with a desire to be respectful of the individuals who are caught up in the midst of the disaster.
- Create a detailed communication plan to be used during an emergency, including a clear definition of the role of the governor, his or her staff and the role of state department and agency staffs.
- Be prepared to monitor media coverage during an emergency and to respond immediately to errors and misinformation.
- Be prepared to draw on department and agency communications professionals during an emergency and make sure that they are adequately trained for the roles that they will be asked to play.
- National and international media will play a major role in covering a catastrophe. In many cases, those effected by a catastrophe will need to rely on national media for critical information as local media may not be able to operate during the early stages of a crisis. Recognize the critical role of the national media and be prepared to ensure that they have timely and accurate information. Monitoring media coverage may be necessary to immediately correct misinformation. (Louisiana is planning to embed media with some first responders.)
- Create a mechanism to keep other political leaders informed of the status of emergency operations during the emergency. (Louisiana conducted nightly conference calls for state legislators.)

- Recognize that other political leaders will have information and requests for assistance that they will want to share with the emergency operations center. Create a mechanism for receiving and dealing with those requests in a timely manner.
- Don't wait for an emergency. The governor and state agencies can play a valuable role in communicating critical preparedness information to their constituencies prior to an emergency and in reinforcing messages during an emergency.
- Provide media access in a manner that preserves the integrity and security of the emergency operations center.

Understand the Resources Available from the Federal Government and Other States and be Prepared to Deal with Intergovernmental Issues

During a major disaster or catastrophe the state will need to call on a wide variety of other resources, including resources from the federal government and from other states. This contingency is often addressed in detailed emergency plans. However, the availability of resources and the approach and capacity of needed partners may vary from time to time. It is important that the state and the governor be aware of these potential changes and that state plans be revised as needed.

Depending on the scope and scale of the event, the federal government may seek to assume primary responsibility for the emergency response.

In addition, during a catastrophe, the state must be prepared to respond to numerous, often uncoordinated offers of assistance.

Lessons Learned

- Understand the role of the National Guard and how its responsibilities and authority differs from that of federal troops.
- Recognize that states and localities will need to be prepared to rely largely on their own resources during the first 72 – 96 hours of an emergency.
- In a catastrophe it is likely that the federal government may seek to assume the leadership role, supplanting the governor's authority. It is important that the governor understand the implications of such a decision and be prepared in advance to respond to such a request.
- Establish a direct line of communication with the White House in order to address resource or coordination issues that may arise during the response to an emergency.
- Understand the nature of the command structure for federal resources and be prepared to deal with the likelihood that some state coordination may be needed to ensure a consistent response.

- Make certain that appropriate officials are familiar with policies and procedures relating to the use of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), including the authority to approve a request for assistance.
- During a catastrophe the governor will be overwhelmed by offers of assistance from a wide variety of sources. Many of those offering assistance will wish to speak directly with the governor. An emergency plan should include procedures for receiving, coordinating and responding to such offers, including the screening necessary to minimize demands on the time of the governor.
- To date states have been able to rely on assistance provided by National Guard units and other professionals in other states. While this will continue to be an important component of any response, planning should address what will transpire should those resources be diluted in a response to multiple catastrophic events or a nationwide emergency such as a pandemic.

Enhance Your Capacity to Assist Other States

As noted above, states confronting a catastrophe rely heavily on the assistance available from other states. The National Guard plays a primary role, but this may be supplemented by a wide variety of other resources such as police, firefighters and medical personnel. The existing EMAC system worked extremely well during the crisis in Louisiana and provides an invaluable component of the state's emergency management plan. However, there are some ways in which a state wishing to help might improve their capacity to do so.

Lessons Learned

- During an emergency in another state, be prepared to have state staff serve as the consolidator for offers of assistance in order to minimize the impact on the requesting state.
- Play a more aggressive role in reviewing and forwarding claims for reimbursement. Refrain from commenting on the adequacy of the ongoing response during an emergency.
- Identify gubernatorial staff with hands on experience in dealing with large scale emergency management and prepare to make that staff available to a state in crisis. Offers of specific task-identified assistance are more helpful than general inquiries or offers of support.
- Make sure appropriate staff are aware of the documentation required for EMAC payments. In some instances, EMAC requires proof of a sending state's pre-event written policy (such as an overtime policy) in order for payment to be authorized.

Focus Attention on the Need for Appropriate Federal Legislation

While the initial responsibility for emergency response rests with localities and states, any large scale catastrophe will require the assistance and involvement of the federal government. An understanding of the applicable federal statutes and regulations pertaining to reimbursement is

critical. The Stafford Act does not allow recovery for many types of damage caused by a catastrophic event, such as the loss of a government's tax base. FEMA does not currently have a standardized interpretation of its regulations. Variations in interpretation can be found among the FEMA regions, and also within a FEMA region.

Lessons Learned

- Understand the importance of federal legislation and play an active role in efforts to reform and/or reauthorize that legislation.
- Recognize that any claims for federal reimbursement will be subject to scrutiny from multiple federal agencies and consider the creation of a pre-audit function to ensure that all claims are appropriately documented.
- Understand the provisions of current federal law and be prepared to hold federal officials accountable.
- Make certain that state staff fully understand the available federal assistance and the limitations of federal assistance.

Be Prepared for the Aftermath

It is a fact of life that the state's response to any major disaster or catastrophe will be subject to some level of criticism both during and following the event. In addition, financial decisions made during crisis and claims for federal reimbursement are apt to be subject to extensive reviews and audits.

Lessons Learned

- Focus on the immediate tasks at hand during the crisis and avoid media confrontation to the greatest extent possible.
- Be prepared to document and discuss the totality of the state and local emergency response and to describe and defend it as needed.
- Encourage emergency planners to carefully review requirements relating to federal reimbursement and ensure that state and local policies and procedures are designed to maximize eligibility for such reimbursement. (For example, be certain that state and local personnel procedures authorize the payment of overtime during an emergency and understand the impact on available federal reimbursement when a government does not carry flood insurance for damage to government buildings.)
- Document directions and interpretations provided by federal officials during the emergency and be prepared to contest contrary interpretations following the emergency.
- Make certain that state and local officials understand and are prepared to respond to the need to document claims for financial reimbursement.

- Consider involving the state's auditor in the review and approval of all claims that are to be submitted for federal reimbursement.

CONCLUSIONS

The state role in emergency management incorporates a variety of steps that include mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The capacity of a state to respond effectively in emergencies of major proportion depends on detailed and comprehensive planning and on the regular testing and updating of the plans that are developed. This planning and testing process cannot take place successfully without the active support and participation of the governor. As a result it is critical that the governor take personal responsibility for ensuring that emergency preparedness is a priority for state and local officials and that needed resources are available.

The governor must also be prepared to undertake a number of critical tasks during the emergency itself, including the utilization of their power to declare emergencies, their responsibility as commander in chief of the state National Guard, their ability to ensure collaboration and coordination across agency and intergovernmental lines, and their ability to ensure timely and accurate information is available to the media, the public and to other political leaders.

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This NGA management brief was written in 2006 by Barry Van Lare, Senior Advisor to the NGA Office of Management Consulting and Training (OMCT).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM THE NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices provides support to governors in responding to the challenges of homeland security leadership through technical assistance, policy research, and by facilitating their participation in national discussion and initiatives. Center activities focus on states' efforts to protect critical infrastructure, develop interoperable communications capabilities, and prepare for and respond to bioterrorism, agroterrorism, nuclear and radiological terrorism, and cyber terrorism impacting the government's ability to obtain, disseminate, and store essential information.

In addition, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) has created the Governors Homeland Security Advisors Council as a forum to bring together the 55

advisors appointed by the governors of each state and territory to share common concerns and develop strategies for managing homeland security threats.

The Council provides a forum for discussion, setting priorities and planning action to combat domestic threats at all levels of government. Objectives include:

- improving cross-state and regional communications;
- assisting communications between state and federal agencies;
- identifying and setting priorities; and
- developing a unified state and territorial voice to inform governors of the impacts of federal homeland security legislation, regulations and policies on the states; and informing the work of the NGA Center by sharing ideas and best practices, identifying emerging issues and reviewing and analyzing the impact of federal homeland security activities.

Additional Information

The NGA Office of Management Consulting & Training (OMCT) provides governors, chiefs of staff, and governors' staff members with valuable resources and management services to help lead and manage state government and organize and operate the governor's office. Most OMCT publications are available online at www.nga.org/omct.

For more information on OMCT services and publications, please contact Nikki Guilford, Director of OMCT (202/624-5422; nguilford@nga.org).