

# **Senator Mary Landrieu's Remarks to Open the Congressional Briefing Entitled *Beyond Preparedness and Response: The Challenges of Long-Term Recovery***

**March 10, 2009**

## **Introduction**

- I want to thank the Congressional Hazards Caucus Alliance and the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health for sponsoring this event. I would also like to thank the panelists and attendees who are here with us today.
- The title of this hearing is "Beyond Preparedness and Response: The Challenges of Long-Term Recovery." Emergency management consists of four principal activities - preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation - but these last two mission sets are often lost in the shuffle at the Department of Homeland Security and at FEMA.
- The National Response Framework is a comprehensive document that identifies specific emergency management responsibilities of different federal agencies and the role and responsibilities of state and local governments, as well as the nonprofit and private sectors. Long-term recovery falls under Emergency Support Function Number 14 of the Framework, which calls for integrated strategic planning and designates FEMA as the lead federal agency to coordinate this effort.
- While the federal government may be better prepared today than it was 3 years ago to respond to a medium-size disaster of a short duration, it is still not prepared to deal with a catastrophe that requires a longer recovery period.
- My remarks will cover three important areas in which the federal government can improve current policy and coordination to address long-term recovery needs. I should preface my remarks by acknowledging that recovery is not an exclusively federal enterprise. State and local governments must drive redevelopment planning and land use decisions, obtain community input, provide essential services, and spend federal dollars strategically and responsibly. Government must also partner with the nonprofit community and the private sector to develop sustainable objectives and unity of effort.

## **Housing**

- We need to do more for renters after a disaster. FEMA repair grants and SBA disaster loans help homeowners to rebuild, but renters are disproportionately affected by disasters. Over half of the people displaced by Katrina in Louisiana and Ike in Texas were renters.

- HUD does not track the location or living situation of its pre-disaster residents, and FEMA has repaired less than 40 rental units in the 2 ½ years since Congress authorized it to replace rental stock as a sustainable, cost-effective alternative to trailers. Section 8 vouchers and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits are valuable tools that HUD should utilize to assist renters after a disaster.
- Case management is critical to ensuring that vulnerable populations recover. Congress authorized FEMA to offer services such as job training and housing referrals in 2006, but communities must also partner with nonprofits to fill service gaps like providing cookware, cleaning supplies, furniture, appliances, and helping with utilities and security deposits when a family first transitions into permanent housing.

### **Infrastructure**

- The Gulf Coast has received approximately \$50 billion in assistance from the HUD Community Development Block Grant program, FEMA's Public Assistance program, appropriations to the Corps of Engineers for levees and flood protection projects, and tax credits and incentives.
- These programs contain duplicative and conflicting requirements on eligible funding uses. For example, FEMA and HUD require separate environmental, historic, and cost-benefit reviews for the same project. Another example is the dispute between HUD and FEMA that lasted for 3 years over which agency was responsible for reconstructing hurricane-damaged public housing units. These are clear indications of the need for an independent Federal Coordinator to consolidate agency processes and integrate recovery efforts.
- FEMA's Public Assistance program has been plagued by inexperienced, poorly trained staff who rotate frequently, reverse prior decisions, and interpret policy and regulations restrictively and inconsistently.
- Much work remains to be done, but FEMA is improving its credentialing and training requirements, and the new administration is working with me to streamline current processes and create a new arbitration system to resolve project disputes.

### **Mental Health**

- FEMA's Crisis Counseling Program is inadequate to meet the mental health needs of disaster victims, which have been well documented.
- After Katrina, first responder suicide rates spiked along with substance abuse rates, and as many as one in four children have reported signs of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder.

- Exacerbating the increase in mental health disorders and substance abuse is the fact that disasters severely reduce community capacity to address these problems. New Orleans lost over half its psychiatric beds and medical professionals after Katrina and Rita, other facilities in the state were quickly overwhelmed, and the city's prison now has more psychiatric beds than any of the area hospitals.
- In addition to their toll on families and communities, disaster-related mental health problems impose a burden on local resources and first responders. Numerous law enforcement officials from the Gulf Coast have identified the ongoing mental health crisis at home as the single biggest challenge we are facing.
- Social Services Block Grant funds can be used to fill the resource gap along with increased Medicaid reimbursements, and FEMA should allow HHS and SAMHSA to take a lead implementing role on this issue, but Congress must appropriate sufficient program funding and FEMA's Crisis Counseling Program should be modified to address mental illness and substance abuse caused by disasters by funding treatment and medication options.

### **Subcommittee Work**

- The Subcommittee I chair recently released an investigative report called "Far From Home: Deficiencies in Federal Disaster Housing Assistance After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and Recommendations for Improvement".
- This report is the product of a 9-month investigation into the federal housing response to the 2005 hurricanes.
- It examines the roles and decisions of FEMA and HUD, the perspective of nonprofits and state and local government, the Stafford Act, housing-related litigation, and concludes with policy recommendations for the new administration.
- See Ben Billings after the briefing if you would like to obtain a copy of the report.

### **Conclusion - New Administration**

- The DHAP extension, Federal Coordinator's Office extension, and Napolitano and Donovan's recent trip to the Gulf Coast all demonstrate the new administration's commitment to Gulf Coast recovery.
- Obama, Napolitano, Donovan, Fugate and others will help lead the way, and I look forward to working in partnership with them through my positions on the Disaster Recovery Subcommittee and the Congressional Hazards Caucus to mitigate the effects of previous events and increase government planning and capacity for long-term disaster recovery.