

Overview: Conclusions and Findings

1. Four overarching factors contributed to the failures of Hurricane Katrina:

- (i) long-term warnings went unheeded and government officials neglected their duties to prepare for a forewarned catastrophe;
- (ii) government officials took insufficient actions or made poor decisions in the days immediately before and after landfall;
- (iii) systems on which officials relied to support their response efforts failed, and
- (iv) government officials at all levels failed to provide effective leadership.

These individual failures, moreover, occurred against a backdrop of failure, over time, to develop the capacity for a coordinated, national response to a truly catastrophic event, whether caused by nature or man-made.

2. During a catastrophe, which by definition almost immediately exceeds state and local resources and significantly disrupts governmental operations and emergency services, the role of the federal government is particularly important.

3. It has long been standard practice that emergency response begins at the lowest possible jurisdictional level – typically the local government, with state government becoming involved at the local government’s request when the resources of local government are (or are expected to be) overwhelmed. Similarly, while the federal government provides ongoing financial support to state and local governments for emergency preparedness, ordinarily it becomes involved in responding to a disaster at a state’s request when resources of state and local governments are (or are expected to be) overwhelmed. Louisiana’s Emergency Operations Plan explicitly lays out this hierarchy of response.

4. While several engineering analyses continue, the Committee has found deeply disturbing evidence of flaws in the design and construction of the levees protecting New Orleans. For instance, two major drainage canals – the 17th Street and London Avenue Canals – failed at their foundations. Equally troubling was the revelation of serious disagreement – still unresolved months after Katrina – among officials of several government entities over who had responsibility, and when, for key levee issues including emergency response and levee repair. Such conflicts prevented any meaningful emergency plans from being put in place and, at the time of Katrina, none of the relevant government agencies had a plan for responding to a levee breach.

5. Top officials at every level of government – despite strongly worded advisories – did not appear to truly grasp the magnitude of the storm’s potential for destruction before it made landfall. Over the weekend, there was a drumbeat of warnings: FEMA held video-teleconferences on both days, where the danger of Katrina and the particular risks to New Orleans were discussed; Max Mayfield of the National Hurricane Center called the governors of the affected states, something he had only done once before in his 33-year career; President Bush took the unusual step of declaring in advance an emergency for the states in the impact zone; numerous media reports noted that New Orleans was a “bowl” and could be left submerged by the storm; the Department of Homeland Security’s Simulation and Analysis

Group generated a report stating that the levees protecting New Orleans were at risk of breaching and overtopping; and internal FEMA slides stated that the projected impacts of Katrina could be worse than those in the “Hurricane Pam” exercise.

6. Beginning in 2004, the federal government sponsored a planning exercise with participation from federal, state, and local officials, based on a scenario whose characteristics foreshadowed most of Katrina’s impacts. While this hypothetical “Hurricane Pam” exercise resulted in draft plans beginning in early 2005, they were incomplete when Katrina hit. Nonetheless, some officials took the initiative to use concepts developed in the drafts, with some success in the critical aspects of the Katrina response. However, many of its admonitory lessons were either ignored or inadequately applied.

7. The City of New Orleans, with primary responsibility for evacuation of its citizens, had language in its plan stating the city’s intent to assist those who needed transportation for pre-storm evacuation, but had no actual plan provisions to implement that intent.

8. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, whose secretary had personally accepted departmental responsibility under the state’s emergency-operations plan to arrange for transportation for evacuation in emergencies, had done nothing to prepare for that responsibility prior to Katrina.

9. Some coastal towns in Mississippi went to extraordinary lengths to get citizens to evacuate, including sending people door-to-door to convince residents to move out of harm’s way. The State of Louisiana activated more than twice the number of National Guard troops called to duty in any prior hurricane, and achieved the largest evacuation of a threatened population ever to occur. The City of New Orleans issued its first-ever mandatory evacuation order.

10. The U.S. Coast Guard conducted extensive planning and training for disasters, and put that preparation to use when disaster struck, leading to the successful and heroic search-and-rescue efforts that saved more than 33,000 people.

11. FEMA was unprepared for a catastrophic event of the scale of Katrina. Well before Katrina, FEMA’s relationships with state and local officials, once a strength, had been eroded in part because certain preparedness grant programs were transferred elsewhere in the Department of Homeland Security; with its importance to state and local preparedness activities reduced, FEMA’s effectiveness was diminished.

12. FEMA’s Director, Michael Brown, lacked the leadership skills that were needed for his critical position. Before landfall, Brown did not direct the adequate pre-positioning of critical personnel and equipment, and willfully failed to communicate with Secretary Chertoff, to whom he was supposed to report.

13. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) leadership failed to bring a sense of urgency to the federal government’s preparation for Hurricane Katrina, and Secretary Chertoff himself should have been more engaged in preparations over the weekend before landfall. Secretary Chertoff made only top-level inquiries into the state of preparations, and accepted uncritically the reassurances he received. He did not appear to reach out to the other Cabinet secretaries to make sure that they were readying their departments to provide whatever assistance DHS – and the people of the Gulf Coast – might need.

14. Had Secretary Chertoff invoked the Catastrophic Incident Annex (CIA) of the National Response Plan, he could have helped remove uncertainty about the federal government’s need and authority to take initiative before landfall and signaled that all federal government

agencies were expected to think – and act – proactively in preparing for and responding to Katrina.

15. DHS was slow to recognize the scope of the disaster or that FEMA had become overwhelmed. On the day after landfall, DHS officials were still struggling to determine the “ground truth” about the extent of the flooding despite the many reports it had received about the catastrophe; key officials did not grasp the need to act on the less-than-complete information that is to be expected in a disaster. DHS leaders did not become fully engaged in recovery efforts until Thursday, when, in Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson’s words, they “tried to kick it up a notch”; after that, they did provide significant leadership within DHS (and FEMA) as well as coordination across the federal government. But this effort should have begun sooner.

16. Problems with obtaining, communicating, and managing information plagued many other aspects of the response as well. FEMA lacked the tools to track the status of shipments, interfering with the management of supplying food, water, ice, and other vital commodities to those in need across the Gulf Coast. So, too, did the incompatibility of the electronic systems used by federal and state authorities to manage requests for assistance, which made it necessary to transfer requests from the state system to the federal system manually.

17. Katrina resulted in the largest National Guard deployment in U.S. history, with 50,000 troops and supporting equipment arriving from 49 states and four territories within two weeks. These forces participated in every aspect of emergency response, from medical care to law enforcement and debris removal, and were considered invaluable by Louisiana and Mississippi officials. However, the deployments of National Guard troops were not coordinated with the federal Northern Command, which was overseeing the large-scale deployments and operations of the active-duty military.

18. While large numbers of active-duty troops did not arrive until the end of the first week following landfall – although National Guard troops did – the Department of Defense (DOD) contributed in other important ways during that period. Early in the week, DOD ordered its military commanders to push available assets to the Gulf Coast. They also streamlined their ordinarily bureaucratic processes for handling FEMA requests for assistance and emphasized movement based on vocal commands with the paperwork to follow, though some FEMA officials believe that DOD’s approval process continued to take too long. They provided significant support to search-and-rescue missions, evacuee airlifts, logistics management of buses arriving in the State for evacuation, and other matters.

19. Pervasive and widespread communications failures substantially hampered rescue and response efforts.

20. Law enforcement was a problem, and was fueled by several contributing factors, including erroneous statements by top city officials that inflamed the public’s perception of the lawlessness in New Orleans. Without effective law enforcement, real or imagined safety threats interrupted virtually every aspect of the response.

21. Federal law-enforcement assistance was too slow in coming, in large part because the two federal departments charged under the NRP with providing such assistance – DHS and the Department of Justice (DOJ) – had done almost no pre-storm planning. In fact, they failed to determine even well into the post-landfall period which of the two departments would assume the lead for federal law enforcement under the NRP. As a result, later in the week, as federal law-enforcement officers did arrive, some were distracted by a pointless “turf war” between DHS and DOJ over which agency was in the lead. In the end, federal assistance was crucial, but should have arrived much sooner.

22. While both FEMA and the Department of Health and Human Services made efforts to activate the federal emergency health capabilities of the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) and the U.S. Public Health Service, only a limited number of federal medical teams were actually in position prior to landfall to deploy into the affected area. Only one such team was in a position to provide immediate medical care in the aftermath of the storm.

23. The Committee also identified significant planning failures that predated Katrina. One of the most remarkable stories from this investigation is the history of planning for the 100,000 people in New Orleans believed to lack the means to evacuate themselves.

24. Almost exactly four years after 9/11, Katrina showed that the nation is still unprepared to respond to a catastrophe.