

SENATE HEARING  
HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA  
MAYOR-PRESIDENT MELVIN L. "KIP" HOLDEN  
CITY OF BATON ROUGE  
PARISH OF EAST BATON ROUGE

My name is Melvin L. "Kip" Holden. I serve as Mayor-President of the City of Baton Rouge and the Parish of East Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

It has been estimated that approximately 45% of the survivors of the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina relocated to the Greater Baton Rouge Metropolitan Area.

With Hurricane Rita devastating parts of South Louisiana and causing additional flooding to the City of New Orleans, our emergency response systems have been strained yet again.

Our citizens have opened their hearts and homes to those who suffered great loss, and we are working with FEMA to expedite temporary housing for displaced families who are living in shelters, churches and homes throughout our city.

The City of Baton Rouge dodged the bullet of major devastation, the most serious being over 600 downed trees. This exceeded our losses by Hurricane Andrew, and damaged homes and power lines...making our streets impassable.

We remain severely impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

We have sharp increases in enrollment of students into the public and private child care centers, Head Start, schools, colleges and universities throughout Baton Rouge. Our education officials have worked around the clock to get children back in school as quickly as possible.

Our city-parish is also experiencing increases in requests for economic assistance through our Division of Human Development and Services. This office is working to assist families, process emergency unemployment claims and recruit workers for FEMA to assist with the needs assessments of hurricane survivors.

One of the most obvious impacts of the displacement of people from New Orleans and South Louisiana to Baton Rouge has been our increase in traffic. We estimate more than 250,000 additional people in Baton Rouge based on formulas for traffic counts that have shown a 35-40% increase in traffic on our streets, causing frequent gridlock on surface streets.

Additionally, with the interstate system used as a major evacuation route, our parish is seriously impacted by that traffic as well.

Despite the increased population, many small businesses report a negative impact on sales as a result of traffic, interruption of supplies and loss of customers from the most seriously impacted areas.

Our airport, which usually serves 700,000 passengers annually, expects to see an increase of upwards to three million. For the past few weeks, with constant relief and recovery flights in and out, it has remained the second busiest airport in America, behind JFK International.

And for those of you who have never flown into Baton Rouge, we only have 10 gates, so we are considerably smaller.

The public service providers within our community are overloaded and with your help and support we can address some of our most critical needs: additional police officers, firefighters, emergency medical service providers and public works employees.

Our police have been working double shifts, leaving vulnerable areas that require regular patrols. The strain of accommodating the rapid influx of people into a large shelter in our governmental complex at one point lead to a government shutdown in order to assure the safety and accommodation of both evacuees and city-parish employees. Emergency circumstances such as this indicate a necessity to streamline and expedite National Guard for law enforcement patrols and crime prevention.

Our city-parish infrastructure was already in serious need of improvements, and I am currently seeking voter approval of a proposition to extend a half-cent sales tax, over one half billion dollars, to allow us to bond revenue and jump-start projects immediately.

We have welcomed the local governments of Jefferson, St. Bernard, Orleans and Plaquemines Parishes to operate in our facilities, including holding Council meetings in our Council Chambers to assist them in re-establishing local government authority quickly.

Additionally, we are providing logistical support to the many federal agencies, like FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Safety Administration staged in our community.

I am especially proud and grateful to the first responders of East Baton Rouge Parish – our police offices, fire fighters, EMS and the staff at our Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

The professionalism and compassion shown by the men and women who responded to two hurricanes on behalf of our community was exemplary.

Our parish has many heroes – among them, an Urban Search and Rescue team that went into New Orleans the day following Hurricane Katrina and rescued over 1,000 trapped victims. Working by boat, they were in areas where no other rescue teams were working at the time.

For many people, we are a shelter from the storm. For some, we represent a new beginning. With a rapidly changing population, and serious infrastructure needs to meet pre-Katrina growth, our administration is now seeking relief to accommodate our increased population.

We are also beginning to study our records of emergency response to determine areas we need to improve. There is no question that one of the major factors frustrating and delaying those who were responding to Hurricane Katrina in Baton Rouge was difficulty with communications.

Regional, state, interstate and federal communications must be improved and there must be clear lines of authority as to who is in charge of various operations.

These individuals must be accessible to local authorities.

At every step of our response efforts, a breakdown in communications hindered our abilities to respond more effectively and efficiently.

Our parish, with a need to communicate with multiple first responders, labors under incompatible communications systems and insufficient technology and software to provide seamless information flow in times of emergency.

Our communications systems broke down when cell phones became inoperable due to network congestion and downed towers. Satellite phones are too expensive and also failed during Katrina. Software programs and web based programs should be made available to local agencies and hospitals. One such software is EMSsystems which tracks beds and hospital resources.

With standardization, these programs can be implemented locally and statewide. In disasters such as Katrina and Rita, these programs could be utilized for tracking patients and coordinating triage from ground zero to the staging arena.

Equally frustrating were the communications breakdowns due to burdensome red tape.

Because of our location and relative efficiency, East Baton Rouge Parish in many cases served as a state agency for inquiries, guidance and resources for other jurisdictions within Louisiana.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) was established by the federal government as the standard line of communication. A lack of knowledge and understanding

by many agencies paralyzed the efforts to facilitate order and efficiency in response efforts. Further requirements for paper work and form completions hindered immediate action and deployment of people and materials to assist in rescue and recovery efforts.

Our parish also lacked sufficient communications with federal authorities and was unsuccessful in establishing early communications with FEMA representatives despite their actions impacting our local operations.

East Baton Rouge Parish created its own internal systems to coordinate sheltering, medical care, triage, mental health services, mortuary, family assistance information and help for evacuees with addictive disorders and other needs to quickly fill the void created by the constant influx of evacuees from South Louisiana.

As of this week, we still do not have a designated FEMA contact for individual assistance for those seeking help.

We have an immediate need for a FEMA coordinator to be located within our Emergency Operations Center to expedite available resources and alleviate some of the ongoing issues our city-parish is currently facing.

Poor communications also affected our ability to deliver medical treatment to Hurricane Katrina victims in Baton Rouge. While the volunteer medical response to Katrina's victims was unprecedented in Red Cross history, they were severely hindered by inadequate communications, limited resources and red tape.

Medical volunteers from all over the world began arriving in our city because of an inability to get through to anyone to determine our needs, and a lack of a system for deploying medical volunteers and much needed supplies.

Pre-positioned federal assets critical to the operations of our area hospitals were never received. Resources from the Strategic National Stockpile -- despite requests -- were never locally deployed and were derailed due to paperwork issues. Area hospitals are faced with serious reimbursement needs for their depleted resources.

While the state has begun immunizing responders working in New Orleans, mass immunization of those sheltered in Baton Rouge has not occurred. This should happen sooner for rescuers and those being rescued. Tetanus vaccinations are specifically needed as current supplies have been depleted. Also, Influenza vaccinations need to be given to these shelters ahead of the general population.

This past week an active case of pulmonary tuberculosis was found among the sheltered at the River Center. It is imperative that those people who are in shelters or who have been in shelters should be screened and tracked in the coming 12 to 18 months in order to identify others who convert or become active tuberculosis cases.

We are experiencing a severe shortage of psychiatric resources, having lost 900 of the state's 2,100 licensed beds when New Orleans was evacuated. We have a shortage of professionals to deal with the displaced, the responders and the mentally ill who have been in many cases without their medication for weeks now.

We will need to formalize a process to address long term mental health issues, including crisis counseling services for both evacuees and responders.

We need better preplanning between the state and local government to address the medical triage issues, and the isolation of patients from those who can be housed in general population shelters.

The state has the authority to open special needs shelters. Throughout Katrina and now on the heels of Rita, our regional hospitals have had to deal day to day with concerns about the longevity and viability of this shelter. Without this shelter, disposition from the hospitals for patients without a place to go becomes very difficult.

This past week, the US Public Health Service took over the shelter. New missions and processes have been developed based on federal standards, rather than a manner which would continue to support the local needs.

The financial drain on all of our resources is enormous. Many of the patients who received treatment are uninsured or underinsured...and will be costly to our six area hospitals that are already overwhelmed.

Displaced persons in shelters need access to medical care, counseling and privacy. Our Superintendent of Schools shared my concern that children, who have seen things no child should witness, desperately need a quiet place to heal.

Decisions based on shelters were made by the American Red Cross based on numbers and not the conditions of the shelter. The River Center in Baton Rouge, operated by the City, has a major roof leak that curtailed space available for



evacuees. Additionally, a decision was made to limit the amount of space per person, putting people even closer in already cramped quarters. These decisions must be made not by numbers but by common sense.

I am working closely with FEMA and HUD to provide temporary housing arrangements for families to at least get them some privacy...a place to reunite families...a quiet place for children to study.

We seriously need to focus on the creation of satellite clinics in areas which will now serve as housing for these evacuated families, and areas where we anticipate future growth.

The quickest route to privacy for these families may not be permanent housing, but it will be private. It will provide the privacy they miss...the privacy to protect dignity...the privacy to begin having those quiet moments families need in order to heal from a traumatic event.

These living arrangements are not a solution – a travel trailer does not solve anyone’s housing needs – but at least they allow us to begin moving toward a better environment for restoring families. Short term, we should also look at parallel tracks for housing, including rehabilitation of existing housing stock, putting adjudicated property back into commerce, mixed use development, restoring rundown apartment complexes and prefab housing.

East Baton Rouge Parish continues to operate under a local and state “State of Emergency” and a “Presidential Disaster Declaration.” The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) continues to operate and is staffed seven days a week from 7:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. with responders on 24 hour call.

Since August 29<sup>th</sup>, the good people of New Orleans, South Louisiana and Baton Rouge have shared experiences we will never, ever forget.

Since arriving in Baton Rouge, people who have lost everything and are in many cases still searching for family members, have experienced births...deaths...and we've even had a few weddings.

Just last week, a couple married in a shelter's chapel, forgetting for a few minutes that they are homeless, penniless and living in a shelter with hundreds of other evacuees. The ceremony was planned by Red Cross volunteers, who also served as their attendants. The community came together and cooked jambalaya for their reception. And the couple plans to build a new life in a community located between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

To those who have relocated to Baton Rouge from hurricane devastation, our message has been this: You are our family now. Our hearts go out to you....our homes are open to you...our businesses will serve you....our city will care for you.

We are Baton Rouge. And this is the way we respond to neighbors in need.

None of this has been easy. None of it will be easy in the months to come.

We desperately need help from the federal government to restore families...rebuild lives...cope...and heal.

It's hard to know when one's finest hour arrives. My City of Baton Rouge will be remembered in history for its ability to

become America's next great city while also reaching out to our neighbors in their greatest hour of need.

I have come to Washington this week for the third time since the largest national disaster in our nation's history brought so much destruction to my state – and so many devastated lives to my city.

I have come to ask for your help. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita was too much for one community...too much for one parish....too much for one state.

America always responds when her people are hurting.

Senators, the good people of Louisiana are hurting.

God bless you all.