



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

Opening Statement of:
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Hurricane Katrina: The Role of the Governors in Managing a Catastrophe”
February 2, 2006

In the partnership among state, local, and federal governments that forms the backbone of the American system of disaster preparation and response, our nation’s governors play the central role. They are the essential bridge between local knowledge and needs, and federal expertise and resources. They are the chief executive officers of their states, and the commanders in chief of their National Guard forces.

They are the indispensable decision-makers in times of crisis. They decide:

- When to ask for a Presidential declaration of disaster;
- When to declare a state of emergency;
- Whether to call up the Guard;
- Under what circumstances to stand up their emergency operations centers and ask their sister states for help;
- When to trigger an evacuation order;
- How much emergency financial obligation to incur;
- How best to put the State’s own resources to work;
- And how and what to communicate to a population suddenly thrust into misery, uncertainty, and fear.

The Governor’s influence cannot be overestimated in times of catastrophe. By word and deed, by where the Governor spends time, by the priorities the Governor sets, by the issues and problems the Governor becomes personally involved in, the whole tone and tempo of the response to a disaster are established. And the ultimate results, the successes and failures, to a very large degree, measure the Governor.

Today’s hearing will examine in depth the challenges faced by two governors in overcoming the awful consequences of Katrina. Their experience and insight will help the Committee as we seek to understand what worked, and what failed, across all levels of government so that we can prepare more effectively for disasters yet to come.

I am pleased to welcome Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco of Louisiana and Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi to the Committee.

In this, our 15th hearing as part of our in-depth investigation of Hurricane Katrina, we will explore further issues that have surfaced in earlier testimony about the responsibilities of the States' chief executives both before and after the hurricane hit.

How did they carry out the critical function of assigning responsibility for the Emergency Support Functions under the National Response Plan -- and seeing to it that those duties are actually carried out? As an example of that, earlier testimony revealed that the responsible cabinet officer in Louisiana completely abdicated his responsibility to plan the evacuation of the elderly, sick and poor who lacked their own means of transportation.

How did they see their fundamental role of maintaining law and order and the personal security of the people when local law enforcement crumbles under the weight of its own deficiencies in planning and communications, as well as the severity of the conditions?

How did they resolve disputes and conflicts and jurisdictional rivalries among local, state, and federal agencies that all want to do it their way? How successful were they in expediting government resources to providers of critical services -- even if they are in the private sector -- such as hospitals and nursing homes?

And then there is the uniquely American issue that must be addressed: resolving state and federal differences regarding the status and use of National Guard and active duty forces in a very serious crisis. Under what circumstances, if any, should the Guard be "federalized?" I am very interested in hearing the governors' views on this highly controversial subject.

What of the relationships between states? The pre-storm evacuation by Gulf Coast residents with their own vehicles was relatively efficient, due in large part to exemplary cooperation between the two governors here today. In addition, the assistance from other states through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact process was invaluable. How can such cooperation be enhanced and used to even greater effect?

Finally, how do the governors see their role within their states? Who has the authority to order mandatory evacuations, and how can such orders be enforced? How can the governors help resolve the communications problems that hampered preparation and response across all levels of government? What can they do to remedy the serious problems Katrina exposed that are clearly matters of state jurisdiction, such as the lack of effective evacuation plans for hospitals and nursing homes that we discussed at our hearing yesterday?

Governors are chief executives and commanders in chief, but, above all, they are public servants with enormous responsibilities to fulfill. This hearing will help us understand both their obligations and limitations so that the partnership among governments that forms the core of our national emergency response system will be stronger the next time disaster strikes.

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