

**Hurricane Katrina: Urban Search and Rescue in a Catastrophe**  
**Senator Joe Lieberman**  
**January 30, 2006**

Thank you Madam Chairman. Today we will begin a week of hearings that will examine how well the federal, state, and local governments heeded the warnings and lessons of the Hurricane Pam exercise that was the subject of last week's hearing.

FEMA paid more than \$1.5 million for the Hurricane Pam exercise and follow-up workshops, which began in July 2004 and continued through August, 2005 – days before Katrina's landfall.

One hundred and forty seven representatives of 15 federal agencies, 20 state agencies, 13 parishes, five volunteer agencies, the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, FEMA Region VI, FEMA National Headquarters, and IEM Inc., the contractor that produced the exercise, all took part in the workshops.

The first draft of the dangers this exercise revealed was released in August, 2004, followed by several redrafts until the final draft was written and distributed in January 2005, and the transportation plan was not released until September 2005 – after Katrina.

Pam had predicted the flooding, the people left stranded by it and the need for fleets of buses to get them out. Pam had predicted that local first

responders would be overwhelmed by the Hurricane and that FEMA would need to be able to step in quickly.

But Pam was only the most recent and most detailed set of warning given to all levels of government over the years about what would happen when the “Big One” inevitably hit New Orleans. For example, a 1993 report by the former Government Accounting Agency also warned of the dangers in the Gulf Coast and the flooding in Biloxi after Hurricane Georges in 1998 was what convinced Gulf state officials they were unprepared and led to appeals for the Hurricane Pam exercise.

Today, we deal with search and rescue operations; tomorrow, pre-disaster evacuations; and as the hearings continue, panels on post-disaster evacuations, law and order, and communications.

And all these hearings will show that all these warning over the years, including the specific and detailed warning exercise, were ignored so that one of America’s great cities and its people were unprepared and unprotected when Katrina struck.

Today’s hearing – “Urban Search and Rescue in a Catastrophe” –not only illustrates that lack of preparedness, but also honors the heroes of Hurricane Katrina, who stepped in unprepared to save tens of thousands of lives. More than 60,000 people were rescued by teams from Louisiana

Wildlife and Fisheries, the Coast Guard, FEMA, EPA, the New Orleans Police and Fire Departments, out-of-state responders, and citizen volunteers.

More than 60,000 people rescued by relative handful of heroes. Today, before you speak and we question, I would like to say thank you to you and all the heroes you represent.

These Katrina rescuers are heroes made the hard way because government at all levels did not heed the warning of Hurricane Pam.

Although Pam was a clear warning for everyone that the search-and-rescuer efforts in New Orleans would require boats, helicopters and buses – and assumed a decimated force of local rescuers – these alerts drew no effective response.

As we will hear from our hear from our witnesses today, the heroes of Hurricane Katrina didn't just fight against the predictable aftermath of a catastrophic storm, but also had to battle with bureaucracy, inadequate equipment, and poor planning that is inexplicable given the years of warning.

For instance, in that first dark night after the storm passed, rescuers went out in the limited fleet of available boats and helicopters searching for the stranded – their spotlights providing the crippled city's only light. But while they had some eyes, they had no ears because their communication

equipment either didn't work or was incompatible with other rescue workers.

New Orleans police and fire rescuers often had to wait 20 minutes to get their turn on the jammed up mutual aid frequency – the only frequency available to all. And sometimes they had to resort to a variation of the childhood game, “Operator”, to relay messages to different parts of the city because of the limited range of their equipment.

The New Orleans Fire Department – the city's lead agency for urban search and rescue – owned no boats, despite repeated requests to the city over the years to buy some. The Police Department had just seven.

Police and fire rescue workers were forced to commandeer – and even hotwire – boats to begin their lifesaving rescue work.

Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries rescue workers put on an impressive display of both organization and courage. On Monday morning – as Katrina was still raging -- they transported 60 boats to New Orleans from their pre-staged areas around the state, and by 4 p.m. that same day they began to rescue people stranded in the storm – more than 1,500 rescued by the next afternoon and more than 21,000 before it was over.

But many of those boats were too small for the job, and Wildlife and Fisheries requests to FEMA for larger rubber boats went unanswered.

It gets worse. There was no plan for the evacuation or care of those rescued once they arrived at the search-and-rescue collection points. This awful gap in planning was not resolved until two days after Katrina passed and created the grueling and inhumane conditions at the Superdome and on the Interstate-10 overpasses.

Lt. Col. LaCaze [*La Kahz*] of Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries – who we will hear from shortly – has told us his agency called for medical support at those collection points after landfall, but to no avail. Ground transportation was also lacking and fought over by competing agencies with competing evacuation missions.

When it comes to search and rescue, time is of the essence. Hours or minutes wasted – certainly days wasted – can tragically mean saving a life or not. But FEMA’s search and rescue teams did not arrive in the New Orleans area until late Monday afternoon and did not begin their missions until Tuesday morning, well after the other federal, state, and local rescuers began their work. And they were not trained for water rescue.

Why the delay? It seems that FEMA had no plan for its search and rescue mission.

After finally beginning operations with just three rescue teams on Tuesday, FEMA suddenly stopped all of its rescue missions on Thursday,

Sept. 1, because of security concerns. But other federal, state, and local rescue missions continued without interruption. We want to know why FEMA left the scene of the tragedy.

Madam Chairman, many heroes were born in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and thousands and thousands of people are alive today thanks to them.

What those brave men and women did recalls the words of Winston Churchill because, once again, so many owe so much to so few. But owe we do. And the greatest honor we can pay those who risked their lives in the aftermath of Katrina would be to make sure that the heroes of the next catastrophe, which will surely come – whether from a natural disaster or a terrorist attack – are given the proper equipment and the clear plan they need to succeed even more.