

Opening Statement of

**Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs**

Hurricane Katrina: Search and Rescue in a Catastrophe

January 30, 2006

In the first hours and days after Hurricane Katrina struck, heroes emerged. Across all levels of government, search and rescue personnel took swift action, saving thousands of the storm's victims. These men and women saved the lives of others amid great peril to themselves. They demonstrated outstanding courage, devotion to duty, and inspiring ingenuity.

A great many of these rescuers carried on despite the fact that their own homes and communities had been destroyed.

They also faced obstacles exacerbated by an absence of planning, a lack of direction, and a misallocation of resources.

The purpose of today's hearing, the twelfth by the Committee on Hurricane Katrina, is to examine the search and rescue operations in New Orleans and its vicinity. Our witnesses represent local, state, and federal agencies that were involved in these operations. I look forward to their testimony as they recount their agencies' efforts to locate trapped hurricane victims and to move them to safety.

It also is the purpose of this hearing to dig deeper, to go behind the scenes. We will explore the planning that went into preparing for a disaster that had been predicted for years and was imminent for days, and to discuss how well those plans were carried out when disaster finally struck. We will learn of the impediments these agencies faced to full coordination and

effective communication, and the difficulties they encountered, from the availability of necessary equipment to the management of volunteers and other offers of assistance.

More specifically, this hearing is intended to shed light on the following issues:

Were federal, state, and local efforts to pre-position search and rescue assets successful? While some efforts to position crucial assets in safe areas near the strike zone worked well, it is clear that many did not. As a result, valuable transportation assets that could have expedited the rescue of victims were lost. In other cases, extraordinary measures had to be taken to save those resources before they could used to save people.

How effective was FEMA in supporting the search and rescue efforts mounted by the State of Louisiana? The record appears to be very mixed.

Should FEMA play a greater role in supporting search and rescue operations in flood situations? This hearing will reveal that FEMA has seen its search and rescue role as largely confined to situations involving building collapses, such as occur during earthquakes. Yet, testimony at the Hurricane Pam hearing last week indicates that drowning is the principal cause of deaths in natural disasters.

How well were search and rescue efforts coordinated? The individual heroism and extraordinary efforts that occurred cannot mask the fact that coordination at all levels of government was poor, resulting in the inefficient use of

resources, needless danger to rescuers, and prolonged suffering for victims.

One key search and rescue agency that is not testifying today is the United States Coast Guard. We examined the Coast Guard's outstanding performance in great detail at our hearing on November 9th. At that hearing, we learned that their success was largely due to three principles: extensive planning and training that was actually put into practice when needed; the careful pre-positioning of assets out of harm's way but close enough to the front lines to be immediately available; and a command and control structure that empowered front-line leaders to make decisions. I will be very interested in hearing the views of our witnesses on how these principles can be adopted across the entire emergency preparation and response community.

No one has ever doubted the courage and commitment of America's emergency responders – again and again throughout our history they have performed magnificently when disaster strikes. Hurricane Katrina added a new chapter to this outstanding record, but it also revealed flaws in planning, preparation, and coordination that made their jobs more difficult, put them in needless danger, and delayed the rescue of victims. We owe it to them, as well as to future victims, to do better.