

Senate Committee on
Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
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Testimony

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I'm Mayor C. Ray Nagin, Mayor of one of America's most unique Cities, New Orleans; a city that has tragically suffered vast devastation following the worst natural and man-made disaster to the United States of America. In August and September of 2005, the City of New Orleans was a victim to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita which not only forced hundreds of thousands of our citizens away from their homes, but that took the lives of 1300 people in the region, and stole the trust in the safety of our city.

To Senator Collins as Chair, Senator Lieberman as Ranking Member, and to all members of The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak directly to you on how we managed the crisis and evacuation of New Orleans. I also thank those of you who took the time to come with the Committee leaders to New Orleans to see first hand the devastation we suffered and the determination of our citizens to rebuild their lives and our city. I encourage each of you who have not yet been to New Orleans to come see for yourself.

I would like to take this moment to again thank the American people and our friends from around the world for the compassion, support and generosity shown to our city and our residents over the last several months. The outpouring from private citizens, governments, and corporations all over the world has been remarkable.

I begin my testimony by painting a picture of New Orleans before Katrina. Our city government was transparent and fiscally sound. We had more than \$3 billion in construction activity, real estate was on fire and Donald Trump had just announced the latest Trump Tower would grace our skyline.

We had a starring role as "Hollywood South" with hundreds of millions of dollars in films being made in the area. Tourism was better than ever, with a record 10.1 million visitors coming to our city and thousands of people cruising out of New Orleans.

Equally as important, about 38,000 people moved from the poverty rolls, many into new jobs created in 2004 and 2005. New Orleans and its port continued to supply raw goods and our nation's energy supply.

But one day, on August 29th, everything changed for our city. Please allow me this time to walk you through the preparation and evacuation process along with events that followed the landfall of a very dangerous storm - a storm that will go down in history for many years to come.

The Friday before landfall, August 26, 2005, Hurricane Katrina crossed Florida into the Gulf of Mexico. Although the path was still projected to hit the Florida panhandle, I notified the citizens that we needed to watch this storm closely.

I then activated essential staff, and asked that each department head begin to prepare their staff for a possible evacuation, with some to stay to provide necessary services during and after the storm if it came our way. I also worked with regional and state officials to enact our emergency plans and contraflow to prepare what would turn out to be the most successful pre-event evacuation in our country's history.

On Saturday, August 27, models started to converge, showing the path of the category 3 storm had changed and placing New Orleans in the middle of the projected cone.

I called for a voluntary evacuation urging all citizens that were able to evacuate the city to leave, following the contraflow plan created by the State of Louisiana and implemented on a parish by parish basis. I reminded citizens of how important it was to prepare for the worst. Many New Orleans residents boarded up their homes, packed up, and got on the road to safety.

Our region had one of the most successful mass evacuations in the history of the United States. 90% of our residents evacuated. Over a million people left the region within 24 hours. We were successful in saving thousands of lives.

On Saturday evening, the Governor called to tell me that she had just spoken to Max Mayfield with the National Weather Center and that I should call him. He told me that in his over 30 years experience in tracking hurricanes, he had never seen a storm or conditions like this. I immediately called my staff and visited every television station in the city to alert the citizens and to reinforce the need for evacuation.

To provide a safety net to seniors and other citizens who relied on public transportation, I took another very important step by encouraging our faith based community to reinforce evacuations through buddy systems within their communities.

On Saturday night, the National Weather Service reported that Katrina was now a category 5 hurricane and was approximately 250 miles away from New Orleans with 190 mile per hour sustained winds. Katrina had increased its size within hours and had a predicted storm surge of 15 to 20 feet high.

After a Sunday morning statewide conference call, I elevated my prior calls for voluntary evacuation to the first ever citywide Mandatory Evacuation order. We evacuated as many special needs residents as we safely could to a state shelter and then opened the Louisiana Superdome for the remaining special needs population. Later that day, we opened the Superdome as the refuge of last resort for all citizens who had not or could not evacuate the city and used busses pre-staged throughout the city to transport people to the Superdome. I set a curfew for dusk which is when we expected gale force winds to begin.

There were thousands of residents that did not leave, including those with means, who chose instead to ride out the storm like their parents had done during Hurricane Betsy. When reality set in for many of them on Sunday, they made their way to the refuge of last resort.

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Katrina, the most powerful category 4 hurricane to hit the region, made landfall. We began to receive reports of levees breaking. Waters rose as high as 18 feet with 80% of the city receiving some level of flooding. Thousands of people were stranded on their rooftops, or in attics, needing to be rescued. Hundreds died in the waters that engulfed our city. The fact that thousands did not die was a blessing because all scientific predictions estimated that 10,000 would die. Primary and secondary power sources, sewerage and drainage systems and communication and power lines were incapacitated.

Later that evening, we provided FEMA with a priority list identifying commodity and equipment needs and a strategy for the initial phases for rescue, recovery, and rebuild. Marty Bahamonde, the FEMA senior representative, told me "This is one of the best plans I have ever seen presented by a city after a disaster".

In other parts of the city, our first responders were jumping into the water to rescue people as 911 operators were consumed with traumatic calls for rescue. They received thousands upon thousands of frantic and desperate calls.

As the days passed, the growing number of people on our streets needing shelter required us to open the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center as a secondary refuge. The 350 busses promised by FEMA on Monday still had not come.

The strain on our limited resources intensified as people desperate for necessities and others taking advantage of the unstable situation caused a security problem.

Fires were breaking out in the city and firefighters had very little means to contain them. The lack of utilities and communications crippled our city.

We faced a serious set of new challenges daily. We faced them head-on ready to do whatever it would take to save our city.

I directed our team to focus on the following priorities:

1. Search and rescue of people trapped and stranded
2. Evacuation of the Superdome, Convention Center and bridges
3. Patching the levee breaks
4. Draining the floodwaters
5. Recovery of the dead

Every day, requests were sent to the State and Federal authorities for emergency assistance needed to save lives and restore order. We requested search and rescue assistance, busses for evacuation, assistance in patching the levees, food, water, medical supplies, police and fire equipment and pumps to drain water.

I don't know if I can convey the desperation, but I was looking at my city with thousands of people who were on the street, on our bridges, in the water, in the Superdome and at the Convention Center...people from the lower-lying parts of the region being dropped into our city. We were in most desperate need for assistance.

On Wednesday, the situation in the Superdome was tenuous at best and no food or water had arrived at the Convention Center. Rescue efforts by air were only beginning to get underway. Because communication channels were down and inconsistent, we found creative ways to communicate via text messaging to a Communications staff person in Houston. We were trying to get a message to anyone we thought that could get the busses we needed to evacuate people.

Little help had arrived as the day turned to night and you could feel the heaviness of the aftermath. Imagine the nights -- pitch black, no power, intense heat and people crying for help. It was a horrible situation and Wednesday night was touch and go for the city.

On Thursday, conditions continued to deteriorate. I received word from the National Guard and New Orleans police that the suffering in the Superdome and Convention Center was becoming inhumane, there was increasing pressure to leave the buildings and incidents of violence were escalating. As the day passed, I sent out more urgent pleas for help.

Finally, on Friday afternoon we began to see passengers loading into busses. Late Friday night, I watched the last bus leave the Convention Center. Saturday, the final bus left the Superdome. Many people had been there for 7 full days.

I should point out that at the Superdome, the New Orleans Police Department and the National Guard held security intact. That guard unit and those officers were heroes. People could not leave the Dome as it was surrounded by water and there were no busses. The rations were stretched. There was no power and sanitation. Good people suffered needlessly.

In the end, it was a horrible lesson but one that I am hopeful we will learn from. By far, most of the people showed tremendous compassion for their fellow man and heroism existed in the waters, at the Superdome, at the Convention Center, on the bridges and on the streets.

Since the storm, we have been a financially crippled municipality struggling to bring our city back. Hurricane Katrina, like 9-11 and other disasters before, has taught us that improvements in planning for disasters must be made at all levels of government. Our plans for the future include enhanced evacuation routes, staging necessary resources outside of the city and not

being as dependent on the rescue efforts of other levels of government. This storm has challenged us and we are responding.

Consideration must also be given to the financial resources that should be available for jurisdictions that experience this type of major disaster. I urge this committee to take a close look at the Stafford Act. Our first responders and essential personnel worked around the clock responding to the emergency, yet under the Stafford Act, assistance is provided for only “the overtime” component of that work. Then I was forced to radically cut our budget and lay off 50% of our workforce when our constituents need the services these hardworking public servants provide more than ever; this is another effect of the inadequacy of the Stafford Act which only allows for a loan for up to 25% of lost revenue, regardless of the severity of the need. The Stafford Act should be amended to address these problems.

As I conclude, I need to recognize our emergency response team, led by Col. Terry Ebbert, my Director of Homeland Security, who appeared before you earlier this week. Their work has gone largely unnoticed. Despite tremendous personal loss, police officers, fire fighters, National Guard and EMS workers experienced horrific tragedy and stayed true to their tasks. They are our heroes.

I want to thank you again for allowing me to be here with you today and for your work to ensure that we as a nation are better prepared to respond to future disasters like Hurricane Katrina. My hope is that our collective work to rebuild New Orleans and its region will provide a model of how a nation restores one of its jewels.

Thank you.