



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:
Managing the Crisis and Evacuating New Orleans
February 1, 2006

The humanitarian crisis that overwhelmed the City of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina shocked the world and shamed our nation. The damage came from a powerful force of nature, but much of the protracted misery that followed was the result of failures across all levels of government.

Today's hearing, the Committee's fourteenth on Hurricane Katrina, will examine the roles, responsibilities, and actions of public officials in preparing for and managing the crisis.

We will focus on the root causes of failure, including shortfalls in the planning and execution of plans. Citizens expected concerted, coordinated action. For the most part, they got confusion, conflict, and chaos.

News photos showed the human misery in New Orleans and surrounding communities. Less obvious was how it might have been mitigated – what steps might have been taken to evacuate more people before Katrina struck and to prepare for rescuing those left behind.

Our first witness today is New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, the commander-in-chief of the city's emergency response. He will discuss the city's responsibilities in preparing for and responding to Katrina and the adequacy of state and federal support.

I will ask Mayor Nagin about such issues as:

- whether the resources the city devoted to emergency preparedness prior to Katrina matched the known risks;
- whether the city had an effective emergency command and control structure;
- whether plans for pre-landfall evacuation of people without vehicles were made, and how well those plans were understood and carried out; and
- why plans for post-landfall care or evacuation of people left in the city were so incomplete.

Our second panel of witnesses consists of public officials who provided support and security to the victims stranded in New Orleans and assisted in their eventual evacuation. They represent the Capital Area Transit System of Baton Rouge, the United States Army, and the U.S. Department of Transportation. Their testimony should help us understand the problems of planning, coordination and communication that compounded the crisis. We will also take note of the tremendous efforts of some officials and volunteers that produced effective countermeasures to some of these problems.

This crisis displayed failures of leadership, planning, preparation, and execution at all levels of government. We must take to heart the lessons that will better protect our citizens when disaster next strikes.

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