

Testimony of Mayor Dan Coody  
City of Fayetteville, Arkansas  
September 28, 2005

Because of the proximity of our two states, the people of the State of Arkansas consider the people of Louisiana to be our neighbors. Many Arkansans travel to and through Louisiana and Mississippi, the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville has students from both states, and many of us have ties to friends and family in the Gulf Coast. When Hurricane Katrina struck, Arkansans responded as you would hope a good neighbor would in a crisis.

As the crisis unfolded and the lack of a coherent national response became apparent, I instructed my staff to assess our resources and coordinate with local emergency efforts to develop and implement a response plan as soon as possible. Key city staff including myself, Police Chief Frank Johnson, Public Policy Advisor Susan Thomas and four local citizens met to establish a plan for how best to utilize city resources in relief efforts. Earlier this year, Fayetteville had purchased a 126,000 sq. ft. industrial building with the plan of converting it into a joint police department, fire department and emergency response center. The closed and empty facility offered tremendous warehouse space with loading docks useful for a regional collection, handling, and distribution center. It also contained plenty of office space where local non-profits could assist survivors of the hurricane that had made their way to Fayetteville.

On Sunday, September 4, I met with members of my staff at the industrial facility to create a plan to make the defunct warehouse and office space operable as we began collaborating with Washington County Judge Jerry Hunton and Washington County Emergency Manager John Luther. Our county officials were also assessing available resources and responding to the small amount of information we were getting about the number of evacuees to expect in the area. While information was sparse, Judge Hunton and I knew that our staffs would have to collaborate and plan for whatever unknown situation might arise in the hours and days ahead.

After our meeting, it was evident that the information and communication failures at the Federal level were cascading through the state government and on down to the local levels. Judge Hunton and I knew that we were ultimately responsible for any survivors that entered our community; we had to accept the fact that communication and information systems established by federal and state emergency plans were not functioning. However, we had to move forward, prepare for an influx of evacuees and ensure that our local communications were strong and sustainable.

Judge Hunton called a county wide meeting on Sunday, September 4<sup>th</sup>, to get all the players at the table, including County and City officials, emergency responders, Red Cross, Salvation Army, local churches and church camps that had been called to shelter survivors, regional transportation officials, local media, and others. Without any real communication or coordination from outside the local level we all knew we had to use

whatever information we could get from television reports, informal lines of communication and rumors. The failure of our formalized emergency communication system and lack of solid information required the County and the City to insist that, at least at the local level, communication and information would be shared and utilized to the best of our ability.

On Sunday, Sept. 4<sup>th</sup>, while Judge Hunton was working to establish these communication lines, our city staff was preparing the industrial facility for occupation. The entire abandoned building needed to be cleaned and brought back to life. Everything from electrical transformers to phone lines had to be re-installed. Office equipment and furnishings were brought in, as were forklifts and pallets. Two days later on Tuesday the 6<sup>th</sup>, the facility was prepared to ship and receive, house local non-profits, or be utilized for any other activity that was needed in the region.

On Monday, Sept. 5<sup>th</sup>, it was brought to our attention by Congressman John Boozman's office that eight tractor trailers had been strategically located throughout the region by various officials and organizations to collect contributions from the citizens of Northwest Arkansas. When these groups learned of our facility their trailers started arriving the next day. However, a clear plan for the organized collection of such a huge volume of goods, sorting, storing and distribution to local shelters or to the Gulf Coast was not in place.

In the process of collecting goods, no restrictions were placed on what was collected on the trailers. When the trailers arrived at our facility, we unloaded the first two and immediately filled three warehouse rooms full of bags and boxes that needed to be sorted, re-boxed, labeled, and palletized. Knowing there were many more trailers to come, we realized that much more assistance was needed to efficiently process the donations and prepare them for distribution.

We requested assistance from Wal-Mart headquarters, and they immediately responded by sending two engineers to create a warehouse system for our facility, a distribution center supervisor and two additional employees to implement their plan and oversee the operation. In addition, Wal-Mart and other businesses contributed warehouse supplies such as pallets, pallet jacks, boxes, tape, and other items that were needed for the processing of goods. I made a city wide call for volunteers help sort, box, and palletize the goods, and the County provided daily work release inmates for additional labor. During peak hours we had over one hundred volunteers, city employees, Wal-Mart employees, and work release inmates working side by side to organize the donations. The trailers were unloaded by Saturday, September 10 and the donations were ready for shipment by September 15.

On Thursday, September 8, survivors that had made their way to Fayetteville to stay with family or friends were stopping by the distribution center in search of financial aid, food, clothes, and other assistance. There were also individuals coming by that had simply been on the road for days and were searching for some help and information. Many of these folks were still in shock, had been living in their cars, and for whatever reason had not

been able to locate assistance in various other towns between the affected areas and Northwest Arkansas.

We had not anticipated receiving evacuees at the distribution center; therefore we were not sure how to provide appropriate assistance. One by one we heard the story of survivors being bounced from place to place and town to town, so we made the decision not to send these folks back out into town searching for different agencies or sources of support. We took it upon ourselves to find answers, information, and assistance for these evacuees. We pulled boxes off pallets and made food and clothes available to these individuals. As I witnessed this event, and watched my staff help people dig through boxes trying to find a shirt that fit or a pair of shoes in the right size, I realized that we needed to modify our operation to include not only large scale distribution of goods but small scale as well. It was clear that this first wave of individuals would not be the last, and that we needed to set up an environment that preserved the evacuees' dignity and make it easy for them to find the items they needed. Distribution Center staff was instructed the next morning to begin setting up a store environment where people could "shop" for what they needed. Because of the large amount of space available in the facility, we were able to split the operation into three primary areas: small scale receiving and distribution for individual donations and assistance, large scale receiving and distribution for collection and distribution to affected areas, as well as a staging/sorting/storage area for material.

In addition to food and clothing, many of the evacuees still needed to register with Red Cross and other agencies. Others looked for possible housing options. From September 4<sup>th</sup> through the 10<sup>th</sup>, each of these relief organizations and services were located at the County Sheriff's Office about 3 miles from our facility. However, it became clear that since food and clothing were located at the distribution center, most evacuees would make their way to the Center first, and common sense dictated that we should locate all available assistance in one location. On Friday, September 9, the County Judge and I held a press conference to announce that the relief agencies would be moving their assistance efforts from the County facility to our distribution center. On Monday, September 12, the Center offered a "one-stop" location where evacuees could access various types of assistance and support.

We made office space, tables, chairs, copy and fax machines, telephones, and internet access available to organizations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Department of Human Services, Health Department, and FEMA. The City also staffed a front office "help" desk to help direct over 400 evacuees to the right place and provide information as needed. The Red Cross provided financial assistance and coordinated housing to local hotels. The Salvation Army provided assistance in getting people to the local shelter. Arkansas' Department of Human Services assisted with food stamps. FEMA maintained a presence and assisted people in the Center for two days. A local volunteer provided ongoing assistance with this endeavor after FEMA left. OpenYourHome.com continues to work from their offices at the Center. This local organization is operating nationally to match survivors with housing opportunities in desired locations.

Since September 6<sup>th</sup>, the City has received over 500 pallets of food, clothes, water, toiletries, household products, baby food, formula, diapers, and other incidentals. About half of those items have been sent to the affected areas including shipments to the cities of Harvey, Varnado, and Angie, LA, and Jackson, Gulfport, and Laurel, MS.

Three tractor trailers of sorted, folded, and labeled clothing items were shipped to the Salvation Army staging warehouse in Corsicana, TX. Many of these shipments were sponsored by local businesses and churches and were arranged by making direct contact with community members in the affected areas. One example of this city-to-city communication occurred when the City of Fayetteville connected with Louisiana State Senator Ben Nevers. We established what was needed where, arranged the transportation, and shipped supplies directly to that location. We learned many of the rural areas were not receiving adequate support and were still in desperate need of various items that we had in stock. This information encouraged us to focus our large scale distribution efforts on the more rural areas of Louisiana. Yet, while we had pallets of everything from food, water, wheelchairs, and baby supplies palletized and ready to go, our efforts to communicate and coordinate the movement of our supplies to those areas that needed them the most was our biggest challenge.

The Center has experienced many great success stories, and I believe this is due to the fact that all of the leaders at the local level cooperated, communicated and responded to the needs that were presented to us. The lack of information and direction from the national and state emergency response systems continues to cause strain on local efforts. However, our county and city governments, local chapters of national relief organizations, local corporations and businesses, churches, and our grassroots relief organizations are staying in direct contact with one another and collaborating on our continued response to Hurricane Katrina. This collaboration extends to our efforts to plan not only for future expected demands placed on us by emergencies in other areas of the country, but also for future disasters that may strike closer to home.

It is our obligation as government officials to provide the leadership and resources needed to reinforce the approaches that worked and reinvent the approaches that failed. These lessons learned must be clearly articulated, incorporated into our local, regional, and state emergency response plans, and implemented in the event of another disaster. As Fayetteville continues its plan to build a state-of-the-art police, fire, and emergency response center, we will incorporate what we learned from experience. We will preserve in our facility the capacity to ship and receive large quantities of material when necessary. These warehousing areas can be used for a variety of community functions and city operations in such a way that they could be quickly prepared for disaster relief. The County and the City will be partners in an emergency operations and communications command center to be completed in 2006. As we continue to assess our potential for improvement we will find more ways to respond efficiently to future disasters.

But no matter how hard we work, we will not be as effective as we could be without direct communication and information between all levels of government. If the

established, practiced, and well-funded state-wide emergency response system is circumvented so that local governments, emergency managers, and agencies are left to rely on guesswork, we will again witness unnecessary suffering, confusion, and frustration. The overall state-wide emergency response system which includes municipal and county governments, related state agencies, and non-profits must be activated and coordinated in a crisis. City and County governments all across America stand willing and able to do whatever is necessary to help our neighbors in crisis. Federal, state and local governments exist to provide for the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens. Those of us in local government will not stand idly by as tragedy unfolds simply because we were not told what needs to be done. We will act. We will focus our resources and we will figure out what needs to be done and how to do it. But without coordination with our state and federal governments, our effectiveness will be limited and the suffering of our friends, our neighbors, and our families will be prolonged for no reason.

The Fayetteville Disaster Relief Center could serve as a model for coordinating local resources. Centers such as ours could be strategically located, grounded in public-private partnerships, and be ready for activation on a moment's notice. This Center would not have been possible without the influx of city resources, the logistical assistance from the private sector, the dedication of our local volunteers, and the strong positive relationship between County and City officials. It is also important to recognize that such a system should already exist within the established emergency response infrastructure. The simple truth is that without implementation of an established plan, relief efforts are unlikely to work. Washington County, the City of Fayetteville, and our local relief organizations responded to this crisis to the very best of our ability. Our efforts were successful because we worked together, placing a great deal of importance on sharing what information we had.

As Mayor, I can assure you that our efforts in the future will be focused on planning and preparation, building partnerships with our fellow county and state officials, identifying resources available with our local and regional non-profit support and relief agencies, and insisting that my office, my staff, and my emergency responders have the education, training, and skills to respond to and manage a local or regional disaster. My hope is that all government officials share that goal.