

**Statement of
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**Before the
United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

**Hearing on
“Hurricane Katrina: Managing the Crisis and Evacuating
New Orleans”
February 1, 2006**

Madam Chairman, Honorable Members of the Committee and guest, thank you

for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Capital Area Transit System (CATS) from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I am honored that you have requested me here today to discuss disaster preparedness and emergency response to Hurricane Katrina. I hope to show you what a valuable role mass transit performed during hurricane Katrina, and as it continues to aid in the devastation and aftermath of this cataclysm.

First, let me say I bring greetings from Baton Rouge Mayor-President Kip Holden and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco. They were pivotal in my and CATS ability to maximize efforts in providing essential emergency services. I must recognize the contributions of FEMA and FTA in providing policy direction and technical assistance. I would also like to recognize all

the agencies that worked so tirelessly for many weeks to assist in the needs of displaced citizens and the delivery of goods and services, and they include the Mayor-Presidents Office, the City-Parish employees, the Governors staff, the state Department of Transportation, the metropolitan planning organization, state police, local fire and police, and the many public and private agencies and organizations. Lastly, I would like to express the gratitude of all the people along the Gulf Coast for the help that this great nation has given, from you the elected officials to the many people and organizations from every state in the nation. I am a witness to the resolve, resourcefulness, and the commitment of people extending a hand and opening their hearts to the millions of hurting displaced families, a lot that have lost everything. I say to you today, we must continue to meet the short term emergency needs and we must commit ourselves to the long term rebuilding and resettlement needs of our fellow sisters and brothers.

You have asked that I discuss resources put into developing pre-Katrina evacuation plans and into the post-storm evacuation of New Orleans. I will present my comments as they relate to pre and post Katrina defining periods for the gulf coast area. Transit in Baton Rouge pre-Katrina had CATS eyes on a major public involvement process to put a referendum to the voters of East Baton Rouge Parish to expand service and to develop a transit

infrastructure for Bus Rapid Transit and light rail. We had a fair amount of traffic congestion and associated infrastructure issues. Baton Rouge was a capital city with a population of approximately 400,000 with an estimated urbanized area of 600,000. It was a city excited about transit innovation and growth potential.

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. I describe it as shock and awe of biblical proportion. A critical crisis situation happened overnight. Within 24 hours approximately 400,000 of the New Orleans 1.3 population were moved to the Baton Rouge area. The road infrastructure was over capacitated. A 20 minute peak period commute went to almost 2 hours. The transit system was overwhelmed. Buses simply had to pass people up along transit routes due to passenger loads. Food, water, gas, utilities and medical became critical supplies. A logistics nightmare ensued for moving anything. Support and coordination efforts of federal, state, and local entities were pushed and stressed beyond endurance limits.

CATS did not facilitate in the evacuation of New Orleans as we were engaged in implementing emergency transit services in the greater Baton Rouge area. The elderly and ADA special need populations were moved from homes to shelters. I worked between CATS property and the parish

Office of Emergency Preparedness. I actually had to drive through the hurricane from my home to the parish OEP swerving past the flying debris. When you are part of the first responder team, the simple fact is that you do have risks. But you plan for these and minimize your exposure. The CATS system is prepared and part of the local government's first responder team. Transit system professionals know the transportation road network, command excellent service deployment ability, and they have good communication systems. In Baton Rouge we participate in OEP disaster incident table top exercises and management practices on an ongoing basis. Many transit professionals possess the tools to respond to chemical, biological, flood, fire and terrorist disaster incidents. Tools for dealing with the disasters need to be developed, upgraded, and practiced constantly. Common operating platforms, logistics management plans, use of professionals, resource inventory and availability, clear chains of command and practice are what I believe to be critical components of meeting the challenge of disaster management. Through practice, team members learn to trust each other, focus on an incident with changing dynamics and optimize the use of available resources. I was called by the governor's office on the evening of August 31, 2005 to assist the state in the post-Katrina evacuation of New Orleans. On September 1, 2005 I reported for duty at the state OEP

facility. Although I had no direct involvement in developing pre-Katrina evacuation plans, I assisted in the coordination and evacuation from the Superdome, Convention Center, I-10, and other areas. School buses, transit buses and inter-city coaches from around the country came to assist in our needs. Some may say it could and should have been done better. Woulda, coulda and shoulda become the operative words. As we have more time to reflect and assess how the emergency operation was implemented, these discussions will result in new protocols, new processes and programs; and this is good. Real change requires real change and that is exactly what we did in Baton Rouge.

CATS, the New Orleans Regional Transit System (NORTA), FEMA, FTA, the MPO, state transportation department and local governments worked 14 hour days from September 8-19 to develop an emergency Baton Rouge-New Orleans project proposal. FEMA and FTA responded with a 47 million dollar contract on October 1, 2005. This is probably the largest FEMA award to a mass transit property in history.

Today CATS and NORTA work side by side in our city providing emergency mass transit services to displaced hurricane victims and also providing a transportation option to gridlock and traffic congestion.

NORTA is operating emergency fixed route local and ADA paratransit service in Baton Rouge. We will shortly begin operation of Park-N-Ride express service with an innovative “buses only on shoulder” program. The FEMA/FTA project has also allowed NORTA to begin calling back to work their 1,350 displaced employees. NORTA has also begun start up service in New Orleans. This is a transit success story because the partners persevered and championed the mission. It required real change in state and local policies and procedures, real change in coordination and internal operations of CATS and NORTA. It has required help from sister transit agencies for equipment. It has required the replacement of fear with endless possibility and boundless opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for allowing me to tell you that mass transit is working and working well and I pray that God will continue to bless this nation and to bless this government. Thank you