

R. David Paulison

Under Secretary for Federal Emergency Management and
Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

By Michael J. Keegan

Learning from Hurricane Katrina

In recent years, whether as a result of natural or man-made disasters, the nation's emergency response apparatus has faced enormous challenges. From the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, these events have taken their toll and illustrated a series of weaknesses in the nation's emergency management and response capabilities. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, R. David Paulison assumed the leadership of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). He has sought to reclaim a preeminent status for FEMA and restore the nation's trust in the agency's abilities. This will happen, according to Paulison, by strengthening FEMA's people, its processes, and its capabilities so FEMA can continue to answer the call to serve the nation in times of need.

"We've been focusing on the lessons learned from Katrina. The primary failure that I saw was communications. It wasn't just equipment," explains Paulison. He elaborates that the "big failure in communications was not having visibility of what was happening on the ground, not having a good, solid system in place to share information." It is this situational awareness—knowing what's happening on the ground during an emergency in near real time—that is critical to the success of any emergency response mobilization. Paulison states, "FEMA and Homeland Security should have known what was happening at the Superdome, we should have known what was happening at the Convention Center, and we should have known what happened to the levees in real time."

FEMA has sought to remedy these failures by enhancing its communication and situational awareness capabilities. "We've been working putting together a communication system ... a unified command system, a system in place to be able to share up and down the chain [of command] and horizontally across the system," says Paulison. "We have that system in place now, and it worked very, very well in Hurricane Ernesto," notes Paulison. To enhance its situation

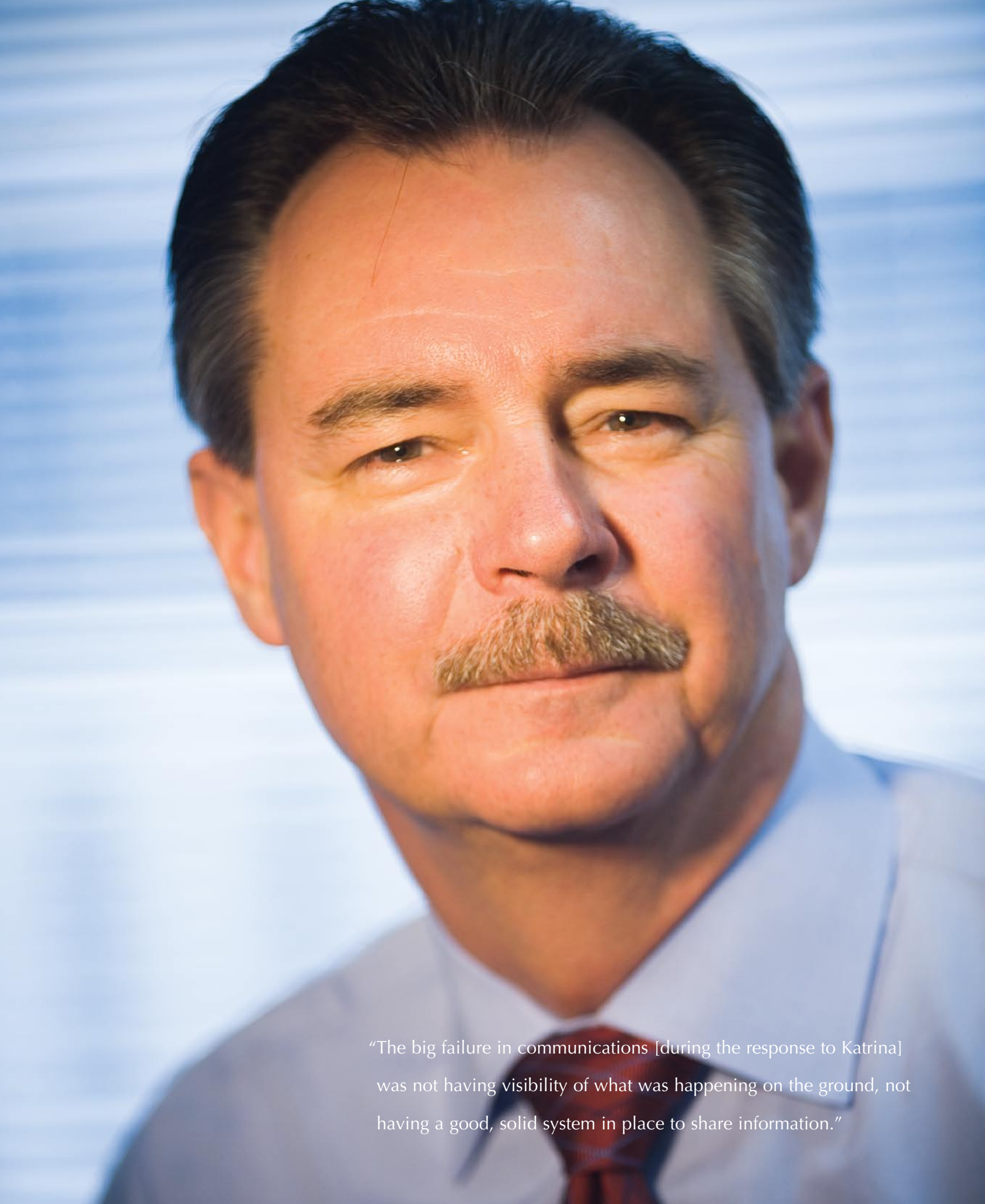
CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Under Secretary for Federal Emergency Management and Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Administrator, United States Fire Administration, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Director, Preparedness Division, Emergency Preparedness and Response, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Chief, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, County of Miami-Dade, Florida

awareness, he says, "FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security have put together several reconnaissance teams that we will pre-deploy prior to a storm making landfall, and they'll have satellite cell phone equipment and satellite video equipment, so we can see, real time, what's going on." Having that real-time capability on the ground 24 hours immediately before and after a disaster, according to Paulison, is the best way to mitigate the effects of an emergency event.

Paulison discussed another weakness identified during Katrina: "The second-biggest failure that I saw was logistics—having the right things at the right places at the right time, and we did not do that very well." Better situational awareness, coupled with a solid communication infrastructure, will now enable FEMA to more effectively and efficiently deliver needed supplies and assets to the right place at the right time. FEMA has, in some cases, quadrupled its inventory.

"On top of [those changes], we have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Defense Logistics Agency ... they're our backup; they will be moving supplies into our warehouses



“The big failure in communications [during the response to Katrina] was not having visibility of what was happening on the ground, not having a good, solid system in place to share information.”

[The addition of GPS tracking on supply trucks] “is a tremendous business tool for us and for the states. They will have the ability to tell exactly where those water trucks are, where the food trucks are, where the ice trucks are, where our medicines are, and we can track those [in] real time.”

as we’re moving them out,” explains Paulison. He also points out that as important as it is to stock up on needed supplies, it is also “important to have the ability to track those supplies.” “We’ve purchased 20,000 GPS units, satellite tracking system units, where we can literally stick them right on the truck and follow that truck down to the very street corner of where that truck is.... This gives us the opportunity to tell the state where their supplies are and when they’re going to arrive,” says Paulison. He notes that this capability to track is “a tremendous business tool for us and for the states. They will have the ability to tell exactly where those water trucks are, where the food trucks are, where the ice trucks are, where our medicines are, and we can track those [in] real time.”

Collaboration is also central to FEMA’s new approaches. “We have to work collaboratively with the local and state governments, with private sector [organizations] like the Red Cross, and with other agencies to make sure we have agreements ... in place ahead of time,” says Paulison. FEMA has established agreed upon assignments with a host of federal agencies. With these assignments, “they know what they’re going to be asked to do, we know what their capabilities are, and we know they’re going to perform and respond to what we ask them to do. It all takes collaboration ... that’s what we’ve been working on this past year to make sure those things are in place so there’s no second-guessing, there’s no surprises.”

FEMA also believes that citizens must recognize their vital part in any successful emergency response effort. “I can tell you this is one of my pet peeves. When people are in an evacuation zone and they’re told to evacuate and do not do so, that puts a tremendous strain on the local first responders,” explains Paulison. “Now they have to spend time rescuing people who should have been able to take care

of themselves, and they cannot focus on those who simply could not take care of themselves.” Paulison presents this point with the passion of a first responder. For many years, Paulison dealt with emergency events as an active duty fire chief. Given his firsthand experience, Paulison stresses the importance of personal preparedness plans. “Even if you’re not living in an evacuation zone, every family in this country, as much as possible, should have 72 hours of food, water, medicine, flashlights, batteries, portable radios—those things they need to take care of themselves for the first three days [after an emergency],” says Paulison.

“Katrina was a wake-up call for not only FEMA, but every emergency manager across this country. As I meet with them and talk with them, they’re all asking the same questions: ‘What if that was my city? What if that was my state? Would I have handled things differently? Would I have been better prepared?’” reflects Paulison. As a result of those questions and the Katrina wake-up call, both FEMA and emergency responders across the nation are working to become stronger, more nimble, and more responsive. ■

To learn more about the the Federal Emergency Management Agency, go to www.fema.gov.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with David Paulison, go to the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with David Paulison, visit the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.