



United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

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February 1, 2006

The Honorable Thomas Davis  
Chairman  
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the  
Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina  
House of Representatives

Subject: *Statement by Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita*

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As you know, GAO has undertaken a body of work to address federal, state, and local preparations for, response to, and recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Enclosed is a statement for the record of GAO's preliminary findings.

GAO will continue work on a wide range of issues relating to the preparation, response, recovery, and rebuilding efforts related to the hurricanes. We expect to provide Congress with more detailed findings, with a comprehensive summary of what went well and why, what did not go well and why, and what specific changes, if any, are called for in the National Response Plan. If you or your staff has any questions about this statement, please contact Norman J. Rabkin, Managing Director for Homeland Security and Justice Issues, at (202) 512-8777 or [rabkinn@gao.gov](mailto:rabkinn@gao.gov).  
Sincerely yours,

David M. Walker  
Comptroller General  
of the United States

Enclosure

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# Enclosure I: Statement by Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

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In recent months, GAO has undertaken a body of work to address federal, state, and local preparations for, response to, and recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I am here today to provide some preliminary observations based on our work to date. GAO is supporting Congress through a range of strategic and integrated audit and evaluation engagements to determine what went well, what did not, and what lessons learned are critical to improving government's abilities to do better in the future. The Inspectors General of the various federal departments are conducting detailed Hurricane Katrina-related work on fraud, waste, and abuse in individual federal programs.

GAO staff has visited the affected areas. They have interviewed officials and analyzed information from the various involved federal agencies such as FEMA and the Department of Defense (DOD); state and local organizations, including state emergency management agencies; state adjutant generals; local officials; and representatives from nongovernmental agencies. I have also personally toured southern Mississippi, southern Louisiana, and the city of New Orleans. I have also had discussions with many governmental and other officials, including the governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas; the mayor of New Orleans; the primary federal official on the scene; and the joint task force commander of active duty forces. In addition, GAO has done a great deal of work on prior disasters, including Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and the terrorist attacks in 2001.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the largest natural disasters in our nation's history and because of its size and strength, will have long standing effects for years to come. It exacted terrible human costs with the loss of significant numbers of lives and resulted in billions of dollars in property damage. At present, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports that FEMA has distributed nearly \$4.4 billion in federal aid to more than 1.4 million households. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have been given emergency declarations to cover expenses related to sheltering millions of evacuees forced from their homes by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Furthermore, many who survived now face the disruption of being dislocated and separated from their normal way of life, the prospect of rebuilding their lives in other locations, and, for those who desire to return home, the continuing uncertainties regarding what kind of life the future may hold.

Significant local, state, and federal resources were mobilized to respond to the Hurricane Katrina disaster, along with significant participation from charitable and private sector organizations. However, the capabilities of

several federal, state, and local agencies were clearly overwhelmed in response to Hurricane Katrina, especially in Louisiana. Therefore, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the level of preparedness and the collective response. As events unfolded in the immediate aftermath and ensuing days after Hurricane Katrina's final landfall, responders at all levels of government—many victims themselves—encountered significant breakdowns in vital areas such as emergency communications as well as obtaining essential supplies and equipment.

The causes of these breakdowns must be well understood and addressed in order to strengthen the nation's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from major catastrophic events in the future—whether natural or man-made. Unfortunately, many of the lessons emerging from the most recent hurricanes in the Gulf are similar to those GAO identified more than a decade ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, which leveled much of South Florida in the early 1990s. For example, in 1993, we recommended that the President designate a senior official in the White House to oversee federal preparedness for, and response to, major catastrophic disasters.

There are several key themes that, based on our current preliminary work, underpin many of the challenges encountered in the response to Hurricane Katrina and reflect certain lessons learned from past disasters. The following three key themes seem to be emerging.

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## **Clear and Decisive Leadership**

First, prior to a catastrophic event, the leadership roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for the response at all levels must be clearly defined and effectively communicated in order to facilitate rapid and effective decision making, especially in preparing for and in the early hours and days after the event. As we recommended in 1993, we continue to believe that a single individual directly responsible and accountable to the President must be designated to act as the central focal point to lead and coordinate the overall federal response in the event of a major catastrophe. This person would work on behalf of the President to ensure that federal agencies treat the catastrophe as a top priority and that the federal government's response is both timely and effective. In cases where there is warning, such as the high probability of a major hurricane (e.g., a category 4 or 5), the senior official should be designated prior to the event, be deployed appropriately, and be ready to step forward as events unfold. Neither the DHS Secretary nor any of his designees, such as the Principal Federal Official (PFO), filled this leadership role during Hurricane Katrina, which serves to underscore the immaturity of and weaknesses relating to

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the current national response framework. More specifically with regard to the lessons to be learned from Hurricane Katrina:

- No one was designated in advance to lead the overall federal response in anticipation of the event despite clear warnings from the National Hurricane Center. Furthermore, events unfolded both before and immediately after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina that made it clear that governmental entities did not act decisively or quickly enough to determine the catastrophic nature of the incident. For example, the DHS Secretary designated Hurricane Katrina as an incident of national significance on August 30th—the day after final landfall. However, he did not designate the storm as a catastrophic event, which would have triggered additional provisions of the National Response Plan (NRP), calling for a more proactive response.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the federal posture generally was to wait for the affected states to request assistance. At the same time, some federal responders such as the Coast Guard and DOD did “lean forward” in proactive efforts anticipating a major disaster. Furthermore, other federal agencies took proactive steps to prepare for and respond to the disaster, such as the U.S. Postal Service and the National Finance Center.
- Although the DHS Secretary designated a PFO to be the federal government’s representative under the NRP structure and to coordinate the federal response, the efforts of all federal agencies involved in the response remained disjointed because the PFO’s leadership role was unclear. In the absence of timely and decisive action and clear leadership responsibility and accountability, there were multiple chains of command, a myriad of approaches and processes for requesting and providing assistance, and confusion about who should be advised of requests and what resources would be provided within specific time frames.

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<sup>1</sup>As defined by the National Response Plan, an incident of national significance is an actual or potential high-impact event that requires a response by a combination of federal, state, and local governments and/or private sector entities in order to save lives and minimize damage, and provides the basis for long-term community recovery and mitigation activities. A catastrophic incident is one that results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, and/or government functions.

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## Strong Advance Planning, Training, and Exercise Programs

Second, to best position the nation to prepare for, respond to, and recover from major catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina, there must be strong advance planning, both within and among responder organizations, as well as robust training and exercise programs to test these plans in advance of a real disaster. Although the NRP framework envisions a proactive national response in the event of a catastrophe, the nation does not yet have the types of detailed plans needed to better delineate capabilities that might be required and how such assistance will be provided and coordinated. In addition, we observed that the training and exercises necessary to carry out these plans were not always developed or completed among the first responder community. The leadership to ensure these plans and exercises are in place must come from DHS in conjunction with other federal agencies, state and local authorities, and involved nongovernmental organizations. More specifically,

- By their very nature, major catastrophic events involve extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption that likely will immediately overwhelm state and local responders, circumstances that make sound planning for catastrophic events all the more crucial. Our previous work on Hurricane Andrew also highlighted the importance of such plans focused specifically on major catastrophic events. Our initial review of the NRP base plan and its supporting catastrophic provisions as well as lessons based on Hurricane Katrina suggest the need for these documents to be supported and supplemented by more detailed and robust implementation plans. Our previous work has also underscored the need to prepare for both natural disasters and man-made disasters such as terrorist events.
- Planning should also include further defining and leveraging any military capabilities as might be needed in a major catastrophe. Prior disasters and the actual experience of Hurricane Katrina show that DOD is likely to contribute substantial support to state and local authorities, including search and rescue assets, evacuation assistance, provision of supplies, damage assessment assets, and possibly helping to ensure public safety. In fact, military support to Hurricane Katrina-affected areas reflected an unprecedented domestic response of 70,000 personnel—far greater than in any other domestic disaster, including Hurricane Andrew. This response involved about 20,000 active duty troops and about 50,000 National Guard troops. More detailed planning would provide greater visibility and understanding of the types of support DOD will be expected to provide following a catastrophic incident, including the types of assistance and capabilities that might be provided, what might be done proactively and in response to specific requests, and how the efforts of the active duty and National

Guard would be integrated. It would also avoid the type of confusion that occurred in Louisiana regarding the types of military support needed and requested, and the respective contributions of active duty and National Guard forces.

- Planning also must explicitly consider the need for and management of the contractor community. In this regard, we found that agencies did not always have adequate plans for contracting in a major contingency situation. We also noted the competing tension between the selection of national contractors and the requirement under the Stafford Act for a preference for contractors from the affected area. Better planning could ameliorate those tensions.
- Regular training and periodic exercises provide a valuable way to test emergency management plans. In our previous work on Hurricanes Andrew and Hugo, we identified the need for the federal government to upgrade training and exercises for state and local governments specifically geared towards catastrophic disaster response. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the benefits of applying lessons learned from training exercises and experiences with actual hurricanes as well as the dangers of ignoring them. FEMA's "Hurricane Pam" exercise—conducted between 2004 and 2005 to simulate the impacts of a category 3 hurricane—identified the impacts such as widespread flooding, extensive evacuations, sheltering thousands of individuals left homeless after a storm, and disposing of tons of debris similar to Hurricane Katrina's results. Not all capabilities-related issues identified in the Hurricane Pam exercise were addressed before Hurricane Katrina hit. In addition, we observed that an incomplete understanding of roles and responsibilities under the NRP lead to misunderstandings, problems, and delays, an area that training might be able to correct. One overall challenge is ensuring that key officials participate in training and exercises so that they are better prepared to deal with real life situations.

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## Capabilities for a Catastrophic Event

Response and recovery capabilities needed during a major catastrophic event differ significantly from those required to respond to and recover from a "normal disaster." Key capabilities such as emergency communications, continuity of essential government services, and logistics and distribution systems underpin citizen safety and security. In addition, as these capabilities are brought to bear, streamlining, simplifying, and expediting decision making must quickly replace "business as usual" approaches to doing business. The following provides examples of capabilities we have identified in our preliminary work. All of these areas require better contingency plans and the resources to carry them out.

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- Hurricane Katrina exposed difficulties in continuing or rapidly restoring essential government operations, particularly at the local level. Local government infrastructure was destroyed and essential government employees, including many first responders, were evacuated or victimized themselves by the storms, resulting in limited continuity of operations for essential public safety and key service agencies. Also, because of storm damage, emergency communications to meet everyday internal and emergency communication requirements and interoperability needs were severely compromised and backup systems were often limited or nonexistent.
- The scope of the devastation, including the flooding in the New Orleans area, made a comprehensive damage assessment and an estimate of services victims might need very difficult. After Hurricane Andrew, similar to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it was several days before local authorities had a full picture of the situation to determine how much and what types of assistance were needed. A catastrophic event will overwhelm the capacity of state and local officials to assess damage, and our preliminary work indicates that the military's significant capabilities in assessing damage—a capability used for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and other past disasters—should be an explicit part of future major catastrophic disaster plans.
- While there were aspects that worked well, it appeared that logistics systems for critical resources were often totally overwhelmed by Hurricane Katrina, with critical resources apparently not available, properly distributed, or provided in a timely manner. In addition, our preliminary work assessing agency acquisition practices for responding to the hurricanes indicates that those agencies needed additional capabilities to be able to: (1) adequately plan for and anticipate requirements for needed goods and services, (2) clearly communicate responsibilities across agencies and jurisdictions, and (3) deploy sufficient numbers of personnel to provide contractor oversight. These capabilities are critical to ensuring that agencies receive the goods and services needed to accomplish their missions in a timely manner and at fair and reasonable prices.
- The magnitude of the affected population in a major catastrophe also calls for greater capabilities in several areas. For example, evacuation capabilities must include evacuating special needs populations such as those in hospitals and nursing homes, coordinating transportation assets, and ensuring that receiving shelters are not overwhelmed. Search and rescue and mass care should work together in a seamless

transition so that victims are not just rescued, but can be taken to a place of shelter.

- Mass care—sheltering, feeding, and related services—following Hurricane Katrina required the integrated efforts of many organizations, including volunteer groups, charities and other nongovernmental groups, organizations providing mutual aid, and the military. Although many of these efforts were successful, it appeared that Hurricane Katrina seriously challenged the capacity of organizations such as the American Red Cross and FEMA to provide expected services to certain populations and in certain areas and at certain times. Housing beyond short-term shelters also became—and remains—a major problem, especially for victims who either cannot return to their community or require housing options in their community if they do return.
- Additional capability will be needed to effectively manage and deploy volunteers and unsolicited donations. Our early work indicates that because of the magnitude of the storms, volunteers and donations, including from the international community were not generally well integrated into the overall response and recovery activities. For example, there were challenges in integrating the efforts of the Salvation Army and smaller organizations, often local churches and other “faith-based” organizations. In addition, federal agencies involved in managing the international assistance were not prepared to coordinate, receive, distribute, or account for the assistance. Agency officials involved in the cash and in-kind international assistance told us the agencies had not planned for the acceptance of international assistance for use in the United States and, therefore, had not developed processes and procedures to address this scenario.
- Lastly, beginning and sustaining community and economic recovery, including restoring a viable tax base for essential services, calls for immediate steps so residents can restore their homes and businesses. Removing debris and restoring essential gas, electric, oil, communications, water, sewer, transportation and transportation infrastructure, other utilities, and services such as public health and medical support are vital to recovery and rebuilding. In less severe disasters, restoring these lifelines is easier. However, the magnitude and scope of Hurricane Katrina painfully makes visible the many challenges in effectively addressing these issues.

GAO will continue our work on a wide range of issues relating to the preparation, response, recovery, and reconstruction efforts related to the



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hurricanes that I have discussed today. We have over 30 engagements underway and look forward to reporting on them throughout 2006. We will provide Congress and the American people with a comprehensive summary of what went well and why, what did not go well and why, and what, if any, specific changes are called for in the National Response Plan.