

Grounded, Mississippi
U.S. Coast Guard photo



Emergency Management: Mississippi

Mississippi emergency-management law gives the Governor broad powers during disasters, and establishes the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) as the agency responsible for carrying out emergency management in the state. The system places significant, front-line responsibility for disaster preparedness and response on local governments.

State Powers and Responsibilities

Mississippi law provides that a state of emergency exists when a disaster is of a magnitude beyond the control of any municipality or county, and “requires combined forces of the state to combat.”¹ The Governor is empowered to declare a state of emergency.²

During a disaster, the Governor serves as a bridge between federal and local governments. Mississippi law authorizes the Governor to direct the various state agencies, including the Mississippi National Guard, to take measures necessary to combat a disaster and to direct local law enforcement in order to keep good order.³ The entity primarily responsible for emergency-management planning and direction is MEMA.⁴ The Governor appoints the head of MEMA.⁵

Mississippi law authorizes the creation of mutual-aid pacts both within the state and between Mississippi and other states.⁶ Mississippi is a signatory to the state-to-state Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC); MEMA directs its participation.⁷ An intrastate mutual-aid pact, established in 1995,⁸ sets out the mechanism for counties and municipalities to contribute, via MEMA, emergency-management assets and personnel to disaster-hit areas.⁹ All of the coastal counties are part of this agreement.¹⁰

Emergency Management: Hurricanes

The state hurricane plan details the four key hurricane hazards – storm surge, high winds, tornadoes, and flooding from rain – and notes the challenge facing emergency managers along the Gulf Coast: “The tremendous commercial and residential development along the coast due to the advent of dockside gambling has greatly increased the potential devastation of a major hurricane.”¹¹

The Mississippi Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (the Hurricane Plan), created in 1999, correctly assumed that a major hurricane (category 3 or higher) would strike the Mississippi coast within the next 10 years.¹² It also assumed that residents, as well as local and state responders, would be on their own after landfall: “Due to multi-state infrastructure damage, assistance will not be available from the federal government or non-affected states for at least 72 hours after the hurricane.”¹³

The plan places responsibility for pre- and post-landfall sheltering on local governments, encouraging cooperation agreements with local American Red Cross chapters.

A unique feature of the Hurricane Plan is its provision for pre-landfall deployment of small engineering units of the Mississippi National Guard to the coastal counties when a major



Ruined homes, Bay St. Louis, MS
Sun Herald news photo, Biloxi/Gulfport, MS

storm approaches. The engineer units' high-clearance equipment and vehicles allow them to operate in flooded areas, especially for search-and-rescue missions, when local first responders like fire departments cannot do so. Accordingly, MEMA and the Mississippi National Guard dispatched small engineering detachments and other National Guard personnel to the three coastal counties before Katrina hit.¹⁴

MEMA hosts an annual hurricane conference which focuses on the state's southernmost 12 counties, those most exposed to hurricanes. Officials from Louisiana and Alabama often attend.¹⁵ State programs also include twice-yearly training on HURREVAC, the computer

program used to forecast hurricanes, for emergency managers, first responders, staff from Mississippi's Keesler Air Force Base, and other federal personnel on the coast, as well as officials from Stennis Space Center, located in southwestern Mississippi.¹⁶

Counties and Cities

Under Mississippi's emergency-management system, local governments and their first responders form the first line of response. Localities must update their response plans at least every five years.¹⁷ MEMA must review them for consistency with the state's own plan and legal requirements.¹⁸

During a disaster, the state activates an emergency operations center (EOC) to guide response, working in conjunction with EOCs operated by individual counties.¹⁹ The state plan also allows local governments to proclaim local emergencies, establish their own emergency-management systems, and seek support from state and federal governments.²⁰ MEMA directs each locality to appoint an emergency-management coordinator and give that coordinator direct, personal responsibility for organizing, administering, and operating the local system.²¹

When Katrina hit, each of the Gulf Coast counties had its own EOC, an emergency-management director, and local responsibilities parceled out according to the 16 emergency-support functions (ESFs) in the state plan. In the coastal counties, local fire departments and law enforcement (both county sheriffs and municipal police) have lead roles in emergency response. For example, in Harrison County, personnel from the largest fire depart-

ments (Gulfport, Biloxi, and Long Beach) and police departments helped staff the county EOC, in addition to their responder duties.²²

Mass Care

By Sunday evening, August 28, thousands of people displaced by Katrina were in shelters across the region.²³ At the peak, September 5, the state had 121 shelters open, with an additional 12 on standby. Over 15,000 people were registered in these shelters – about half of their total capacity.²⁴ The state was able to provide sufficient shelter for the special-needs population, although it often had to move these individuals further inland for appropriate accommodations.

Many residents found shelter conditions quite difficult because of shortages of food and water and sanitation problems. Some shelters were closed to consolidate operations, forcing residents to relocate. Though their challenges were formidable, state and local governments and the American Red Cross could have prepared better. Planning needed to be more detailed for such a catastrophic disaster, during which residents typically need longer-term shelter.

State and Locals Select and Manage Shelters

Federal, state, and local governments worked with the American Red Cross and other non-profit organizations and opened or placed on standby at least 133 shelters, with room for almost 31,000 people.²⁵ Many of these shelters had been approved by the Red Cross before the storm made landfall, which meant that, initially, the Red Cross would staff and manage them. Red Cross criteria include a building's location, at least 18 feet above sea level, and its capability to withstand high winds.²⁶ Local Red Cross chapters worked with emergency-management and state officials to identify and select shelters.²⁷ The Red Cross is responsible for providing food, water, and ice to its own shelters.

MEMA and the Mississippi Department of Human Service (MDHS), working with local governments and the Red Cross, first opened shelters north of Interstate 20, a major east-west highway that runs through Jackson.²⁸ This took evacuees out of the coastal area and accommodated evacuees from Louisiana.²⁹ The state preferred to open more and smaller shelters than fewer and larger ones because, as Jim Craig of the Mississippi Department of Health explained, it is more difficult to monitor and control illness with a large group of people in a single confined location.³⁰

Local governments decided to open additional, non-Red Cross designated shelters to accommodate evacuees who preferred to stay close to home. As Gulfport Police Commander Alfred Sexton explained:

Most citizens are of the mindset they're not going to go far from their homes. ... We had officers actually stopping and picking up people on the side of the road and taking them to the closest shelters ... a lot of people ... historically ... wait until they see rain or wind and then they want to move to a shelter.³¹

Local emergency-management shelters must have met MEMA or local standards. These shelters are initially under the direction of the local emergency-management agency and are staffed by county and MDHS personnel. MDHS is notified by MEMA or the county emergency-management agency that its assistance is needed to staff and/or operate a shelter.³² Local governments are responsible for providing food, water, and ice to non-Red Cross

designated shelters, though they can request help with operations and supplies from the Red Cross and MDHS.

Local organizations such as churches also operated independent shelters. These groups, according to state and local officials, were “pretty much on their own” for staffing, supplying, and managing the shelters.³³ Richard Dawkins of the MDHS estimated that about 60-70 percent of shelters opened for Hurricane Katrina were Red Cross designated; the remainder consisted of local emergency-management and independent shelters.³⁴ Residents were notified of shelter locations and capacity levels through the news media.

Coastal County Shelters Were Options of Last Resort

Shelters of last resort – places protecting from high winds, heavy rains, and storm surge, but with little food and water – were needed for those who could not, or chose not to, evacuate. On August 27, MEMA urged coastal counties not to open local shelters in order to encourage people to evacuate north. However, Tom McAllister, MEMA’s Director for Response and Recovery, estimated that the coast ended up opening a lot of shelters:

Granted, they don’t meet the Red Cross standard ... but it’s better than being out on the highway. And we identified a lot of those, school buildings, churches, ... large community buildings, so we could get people off the road at the last minute.³⁵

In some cases, the Mississippi Department of Health (MDH) had to place nurses in shelters of last resort because they became special-needs shelters.³⁶

Special-Needs Shelters Posed a Challenge for State and Local Governments

The special-needs population on the Gulf Coast includes older adults and individuals with disabilities. For example, in Biloxi, a city of about 50,000 people, 26 percent are residents with disabilities.³⁷

A special-needs shelter is intended for individuals who have no other resources and who need assistance that cannot be guaranteed in a regular shelter (e.g., medication that requires refrigeration, oxygen equipment, etc.). It is not intended for patients who need substantial or constant medical care.³⁸

Robert Latham, MEMA’s Executive Director, described special-needs sheltering as a “tremendous problem.”

When I took this job in 2000 that was one of the biggest issues. ... How do we take care of the special needs population, especially on the Gulf Coast where you have a lot of retirees and there are a lot of people with health needs?³⁹

After the 2004 hurricane season, MEMA had asked local emergency managers to designate shelters in each county for citizens with special needs. According to MEMA, this would have ensured that a location had everything needed for special-needs citizens during an evacuation.⁴⁰ While local officials agreed that counties needed such shelters, some counties did not have adequate resources to purchase supplies and equipment, such as backup generators, beds, and medical equipment for these facilities.⁴¹ Staffing was another challenge; special-needs shelters require MDH medical staff with appropriate training.⁴²

Four special-needs shelters were open after the storm made landfall, in Lincoln and Jones Counties, at Biloxi High School, and at Pearl River Community College in Hattiesburg.⁴³ As needs grew, three others were opened on September 2.⁴⁴ Since many of the coastal counties did not have special-needs shelters, these vulnerable populations were forced to go as far

as Jackson, about 150 miles from the coast.⁴⁵ Individuals and caregivers faced the difficult choice between the dangers of evacuation and attempting to ride out the storm.

Many of the coastal counties used hospitals or other facilities for their special-needs populations. For example, Butch Loper, Director of Jackson County's Emergency Management Agency, utilized the county's two hospitals for special-needs patients.⁴⁶

Since Katrina, the state has developed a plan to provide an additional 1,500 beds for the special-needs population, on a more statewide basis. During the next disaster, it will utilize the state's 15 community colleges and their multiple campuses, as special-needs shelters. According to Craig, the Pearl River Community College, because of its ample facilities and personnel, including a cafeteria with an on-staff nutritionist, water and wastewater systems, and a police force, worked very well as a special needs shelter for Katrina victims.⁴⁷ He described it as a self-contained city.

Shelters Suffered From Overcrowding and Commodity Shortages

Many residents who took refuge in a public shelter found conditions extremely difficult. Shelters had shortages of food and drinking water, sanitation problems, lack of electricity, and no running water for bathing. Kristen Dellinger, a volunteer, described the shelter at Bay St. Louis High School, in Hancock County:

This "shelter" had no resemblance to the "neat cots-in-a-row" kind of place that often comes to mind. ... Most people had staked out areas on the sidewalks outside under covered walkways. They had thin pieces of blue plastic to sleep on. ... The school hallways were dark and filled with streaks of mud. The odor was horrendous. Raw sewage, I think.⁴⁸

Shelters without running water gave doctors concerns about the use of portable toilets, and about the lack of equipment to test the safety of drinking water.⁴⁹ Officials in Biloxi suspected an outbreak of dysentery and closed a shelter. About 400 people had been staying there, and many ignored warnings to stay away from the water. Although no one developed dysentery, many shelter residents had developed the Norwalk virus, an intestinal illness also known as the "cruise ship virus."⁵⁰

State and local officials acknowledged that conditions at many of the shelters were less than ideal. The state had problems obtaining some of the supplies and equipment, such as



Wrecked bridges, Ocean Springs, MS
Sun Herald news photo, Biloxi/Gulfport, MS

generators, that were desperately needed at the shelters given the extreme heat and crowded conditions.⁵¹

To make matters worse, the Red Cross failed to provide adequate supplies and services at both designated and local shelters. According to Gulfport Police officers who were providing security at the shelters, many of the shelters ran out of food and water. This was a chronic problem for the first two weeks after landfall.⁵²

After food and water finally arrived in the county, Colonel Joe Spraggins, Harrison County's Emergency Manager, asked Oscar Barnes, the local Red Cross representative why the Red Cross was not delivering the items to the shelters and was told that Red Cross volunteers and staff were prohibited from driving at night during a disaster.⁵³ In order to get the supplies to the shelters, Gulfport Police took over distribution duties.⁵⁴

Lack of communication and transportation infrastructure problems made it difficult for the Red Cross and other agencies to get needed supplies and services to the shelters. Due to the severity of Katrina, the larger shelters filled up fast, forcing the Red Cross to open up its additional shelters on a tiered basis, rather than open all sites simultaneously. Shelters were placed in tiers based on their location and were opened from first to fourth tiers consecutively. In some areas, the agency even had to do quick impromptu assessments, using a checklist, to validate compliance with criteria before opening up additional shelters. This is extremely unusual for the Red Cross.⁵⁵

The magnitude of the disaster may have overwhelmed the Red Cross' ability to provide adequate shelter conditions for an extended period of time. According to Robert Latham, MEMA's Executive Director, the Red Cross was not prepared to handle such a large catastrophe. In Mississippi, organization was extremely short-staffed and as a result was not able to adequately serve all coastal counties. In addition, the Red Cross, like MEMA, suffered from commodity shortages due to logistical problems.⁵⁶ John McGuire, Red Cross's interim chief, while defending the organization's performance, said that with Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross's biggest sin was reacting based on its response to previous hurricanes: "We had a failure of imagination. We didn't think big enough."⁵⁷

1 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-5(f).

2 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-11(b)(17).

3 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-11.

4 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-7.

5 Among its responsibilities, Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) is required to:

- Prepare a state comprehensive emergency plan to be coordinated with the plans of the federal government and other states. Source: Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-14(2)(a).
- Assign lead and support roles to state agencies and personnel for emergency support functions and other activities. Source: Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-14(2)(a)(viii)(1).
- Provide for the deployment of state resources in case of disaster, including specifically the deployment (and pre-disaster deployment in certain circumstances) of the Mississippi National Guard. Direct and support the preparation of emergency plans and organizations by local governments. Source: Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-14(2)(a)(v) and (b).
- Provide personnel, equipment, and other resources from state agencies and from other Mississippi localities to reinforce areas stricken by disaster. Source: Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-15(a).

6 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-19.

7 Committee staff interview of Robert Latham, Executive Director, MEMA, conducted on Jan. 27, 2006, transcript p. 11.

- 8 MEMA, "Statewide Mutual Aid Compact." <http://www.msema.org/SMAC>. Accessed on Feb. 28, 2006.
- 9 MEMA, The State of Mississippi Statewide Mutual Aid Compact (SMAC), June, 2000. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates nos. MEMA-00023847 through 00023857.
- 10 MEMA, The State of Mississippi Statewide Mutual Aid Compact (SMAC), County and City Members, p. II-B-1. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-00028968.
- 11 MEMA, *Mississippi Emergency Operations Plan, Volume II: Mississippi Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP)*, May 14, 1999, p. APP B-1. Provided to Committee [hereinafter *Mississippi CEMP*, May 14, 1999].
- 12 *Mississippi CEMP*, May, 14, 1999, p. APP B-2.
- 13 *Mississippi CEMP*, May 14, 1999, p. APP B-3.
- 14 Latham interview, Jan. 27, 2006, p. 24; Committee staff interview of Lt. Col. Lee Smithson, Director of Military Support, Mississippi Army National Guard, conducted on Jan. 25, 2006, transcript pp. 15-16.
- 15 Committee staff interview of Brenda Rembert, Director, Planning, Training and Exercise Bureau, MEMA, conducted on Jan. 26, 2006, transcript pp. 27-28.
- 16 Rembert interview, Jan. 26, 2006, pp. 29-31.
- 17 *Mississippi CEMP*, May, 14, 1999, pp. Basic-21 through Basic-22.
- 18 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-14(2)(d); *Mississippi CEMP*, May, 14, 1999, p. Basic-21.
- 19 Miss. Code Ann. § 33-15-17(c)(3).
- 20 *Mississippi CEMP*, May, 14, 1999, p. Basic-22.
- 21 *Mississippi CEMP*, May, 14, 1999, p. Basic-21.
- 22 Committee staff interview of Pat Sullivan, Fire Chief, Gulfport Fire Department, MS, conducted on Dec. 7, 2005, transcript pp. 58-59.
- 23 MEMA, Hurricane Situation Report #8, Hurricane Katrina, Aug. 28, 2005, 9:30 p.m. CT, p. 7. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-0010884.
- 24 MEMA, Hurricane Situation Report #40, Hurricane Katrina, Sept. 5, 2005, 2:35 a.m. CT, p. 8. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-0011290.
- 25 MEMA, Hurricane Situation Report #40, Hurricane Katrina, Sept. 5, 2005, 2:35 a.m. CT, p. 8. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-0011290.
- 26 Jenny Lee Allen, "Don't Bother Looking for a Red Cross Shelter in Charlotte," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, Aug. 13, 2004, p. A4.
- 27 Committee staff interview of Tom McAllister, Director of Response and Recovery, MEMA, conducted on Jan. 27, 2006, transcript pp. 49-50. The local American Red Cross will open the shelter and begin the management of it. Department of Human Services is called, in some cases, to help manage and/or staff the shelters. Committee staff interview of Richard Dawkins, Program Manager, Division of Economic Assistance, Mississippi Department of Human Services, conducted on Dec. 13, 2005, transcript pp. 19-20.
- 28 McAllister interview, Jan. 27, 2006, pp. 51-52. "The *Shelter Resource Directory* provides for shelter activation for Louisiana evacuees starting in the north end of the state and moving south as they fill up, thereby leaving the shelters nearest to the Mississippi Gulf Coast accessible to Mississippi residents should the need for coastal evacuation occur." *Mississippi CEMP*, May 14, 1999, p. ESF-6-2.
- 29 Latham interview, Jan. 27, 2006, p. 108.
- 30 Committee staff interview of Jim Craig, Director, Office of Health Protection, Mississippi Department of Health, conducted on Jan. 25, 2006, transcript p. 47.
- 31 Committee staff interview of Alfred C. Sexton, Commander of Administration, Gulfport Police Department, MS, conducted on Dec. 8, 2005, transcript pp. 58-60.
- 32 Emergency management agency designated or approved shelters are initially under the direction of the local EMA Director, who would be responsible for opening and staffing the shelter, most often using MDHS personnel. Dawkins interview, Dec. 13, 2005, pp. 5-6.
- 33 Dawkins interview, Dec. 13, 2005, p. 56.
- 34 Dawkins interview, Dec. 13, 2005, p. 58.
- 35 McAllister interview, Jan. 27, 2006, pp. 50-52.
- 36 Craig interview, Jan. 25, 2006, p. 18.
- 37 National Council on Disability, NCD Brief on Hurricane Katrina Affected Areas, Sept. 2, 2005. <http://www.jfanow.org/jfanow/index.php?mode=A&id=2497>. Accessed on Mar. 8, 2006.
- 38 See e.g.: Harrison County and Hancock County Emergency Medical Services Districts, "Guidelines for Evacuation and Management of Individuals with Disabilities and Special Needs During Disasters," May 28, 2001. Provided to Committee.

- 39 Latham interview, Jan. 27, 2006, p. 109.
- 40 MEMA, "Hurricane Awareness Week May 30 – June 3," news release, May 28, 2005, p. 3.
- 41 Committee staff interview of Butch Loper, Emergency Management Director, Jackson County, MS, conducted on Dec. 6, 2005, transcript p. 11.
- 42 Craig interview, Jan. 25, 2006, p. 14; Dawkins interview, Dec. 13, 2005, p. 14.
- 43 MEMA, Hurricane Situation Report #20, Hurricane Katrina, Aug. 31, 2005, 1:30 a.m. CT, p. 7. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-0011000.
- 44 Special-needs shelters were opened in Newton, Attala, Clarke, Lauderdale, Lincoln, Harrison, and Forrest Counties. MEMA, Hurricane Situation Report #28, Hurricane Katrina, Sept. 2, 2005, 1 a.m. CT, p. 11. Provided to Committee; filed as Bates no. MEMA-0011104.
- 45 McAllister interview, Jan. 27, 2006, p. 71.
- 46 Loper interview, Dec. 6, 2005, p. 11.
- 47 Craig interview, Jan. 25, 2006, pp. 19-20.
- 48 Kirsten Dellinger, *Hurricane Katrina Kirsten Dellinger*, Society for the Study of Social Problems, Sept. 5, 2005. <http://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/pageId/540>. Accessed on Apr. 8, 2006.
- 49 Kellogg Schwab, Ph.D., "Assessing the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina," John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Sept. 12, 2005, pp. 1-2. http://www.jhsph.edu/Katrina/schwab_aftermath.html. Accessed on Apr. 8, 2006.
- 50 Jerry Mitchell, "Biloxi Woman Feels Like Nomad in GA." *The Clarion-Ledger*, Sept. 23, 2005. <http://www.clarion-ledger.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050923/NEWS0110/509230373/1260>. Accessed on Apr. 8, 2006; "Dysentery Fears Closes Shelter in Biloxi," *My DNA*, Sept. 4, 2005. http://www.mydna.com/health/digestive/news/resources/news/200509/news_20050904_dysen.html. Accessed on Apr. 10, 2006; The Norwalk virus is passed in the stool of infected persons. People get infected by swallowing stool-contaminated food or water and usually recover in 2 to 3 days without serious or long-term health effects. Directors of Health Promotion and Education, "Norwalk Virus Infection." www.dhpe.org/infect/norwalk.html. Accessed on Apr. 8, 2006.
- 51 McAllister interview, Jan. 27, 2006, pp. 53-55.
- 52 Sexton interview, Dec. 8, 2005, pp. 62-65.
- 53 Committee staff interview of Col. Joe Spraggins, Director, Emergency Management Agency, Harrison County, MS, conducted on Nov. 17, 2005, transcript pp. 119-121.
- 54 Sexton interview, Dec. 8, 2005, pp. 48-51.
- 55 Committee staff interview of Ellen Noble, Chapters Solution Manager, Southeast Service Area, American Red Cross, conducted on Dec. 13, 2005, transcript pp. 29-32.
- 56 Latham interview, Jan. 27, 2006, pp. 117-120.
- 57 Jacqueline L. Salmon, "The Clock's Ticking on Red Cross Overhaul," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 21, 2006, p. A04.

