

Prepared Remarks of

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Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery**

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Chairman Cueller, Chairman Landrieu, and members of the Subcommittees, I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify before the subcommittees today about this important issue.

I am Councilman Bill Stallworth from Ward Two of Biloxi, Mississippi. Before Hurricane Katrina bombarded the coast, I served as a councilman of East Biloxi for almost 11 years. East Biloxi, situated on the eastern tip of a barrier on the Gulf of Mexico, is comprised of minority and low-income citizens. Prior to Hurricane Katrina's devastation, East Biloxi was home to roughly 10,000 of the city's poorest residents, with an average median income of \$23,527. The population is approximately 40 percent African American, 40 percent white, 15 percent Vietnamese, and 5 percent Latino.

When I saw that not enough was being done for my community after Hurricane Katrina, I started the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center with a grant from Oxfam America. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) took eight weeks after Katrina to have a presence in East Biloxi, and help was urgently needed. Our organization helped citizens in the East Biloxi neighborhood when no one else would, and continues to do so. At its formation, the organization included only me and a couple of volunteers coordinating relief efforts in the Biloxi area.

Our organization, other small non-government organizations, and church groups were the only relief for the citizens of Biloxi. FEMA and other major organizations were no where to be found. Our small group was able to get thousands of homes gutted out quickly, and we started the rebuilding process within a very short winter. What we all accomplished was impressive, but much more could have been done for thousands of other people if FEMA was there from the beginning. Since the storm hit the coast, East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center has grown and now employs 15 full time staff members.

Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, volunteers came from every corner of the United States, but eventually volunteers must return to their own homes. Volunteers came and went, and housing projects stalled waiting for the next source of labor. In an atmosphere of chaos and desperation, it was easy for things to drop through the cracks. In times like that, it is crucial for a permanent and large organization, like FEMA, to have a long term presence

in disaster areas during the recovery and rebuilding stages so that important housing projects are not ignored.

Rather than simply managing rotating volunteers, we turned East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center into an efficient business; we hired staff and we case-managed. East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center has become one of the only true "one-stop-shops" in the Gulf Coast region. Our clients come into our office to have their case assessed. Then, we put together funding, financing, draw up plans for refurbishing or rebuilding their homes with support from the university design studio, and then we start building. Hundreds of new homes have been built by East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center and its non-profit partners. We make homes safer and stronger than they ever were before. We pair construction crews and volunteers, and, as our volunteers move in and out, our construction coordinator helps provide consistency for each home. In the last six months, we have built 70 homes and we currently have another 70 homes that we are working on. The East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center business and disaster relief model is very successful, which is why other local Gulf Coast organizations have adopted the model.

Another FEMA Fiasco

When CNN first broke the story that supplies intended for hurricane victims were instead given to the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, prisons, and volunteer fire departments, I was outraged. Cleaning supplies, small appliances, and a variety of other necessary home goods were stored for two years, while volunteers and non-profit organizations used precious and limited funds to provide those same items to victims of Hurricane Katrina. Immediately after a catastrophe, the federal government has an obligation to deliver aid as quickly as possible to those with the greatest need. The only way to get aid to the people who need it most is for the federal or state government to reach out to existing local organizations to help facilitate that exchange.

\$85 million worth of home supplies given to unintended parties, as well as the additional \$1 million per year that it cost to store them, could have been used in many important ways. Thousands of people are still homeless along the Gulf Coast, and FEMA wants everyone out of temporary housing programs by March 2009. There are many more people that have already moved into small apartments with aunts, cousins, and friends, to avoid the toxic formaldehyde trailers. Our organization has spent millions of dollars getting people back into homes. Money that we requested for household items from the Red Cross and Salvation Army could have been better spent on making new homes, and taking more families off of the streets.

Instead, the money is gone, the materials are gone, and there are families left without a safe roof over their head because aid money was not properly allocated. In our business, \$85 million in aid could have been used for 1700 new homes if we spent \$50,000 per house. Rather than buying household goods and then locking it up in a storage closet for two years, FEMA should have given the money to local organizations that would have properly used the funds. A bureaucratic mess cost the people of the Gulf Coast \$85 million worth of support.

Non-profits were not made aware of the goods, and it was clear that FEMA ground-workers were not aware of the warehouse either. FEMA agents meet with East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center each week, and they never mentioned “surplus” aid. The people on the ground need to know where to find supplies, whom to ask for assistance, and how to make their way through the bureaucratic hoops to get things done. Instead of reaching out to us, one of the first things FEMA did in their Gulf Coast recovery was to build walls and put up red tape.

There is a national sentiment that the Gulf Coast region has recovered. People assume that after three years, the citizens of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana have landed on their feet. It is obvious that FEMA holds this ignorant belief. FEMA officials clearly do not think that the region is a region in need. Anyone who has spent time in Biloxi or New Orleans should understand that \$85 million worth of cleaning supplies, small appliances, and other household goods needs to be in the hands of the people that lost everything, and not sitting in a warehouse. At East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center, we are the ones that sit face-to-face with the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and tell them that we will help them rebuild their home, but we do not know where the money to fulfill these promises will come from.

FEMA sought help from the state and cities, but they ignored the people who were on the ground making a difference, like the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center. The people that watched the waters wash away their schools, churches, and homes are the most determined to return to their lives as they were before Hurricane Katrina. The heroes of disaster recovery have been local leaders that decided they can not wait around any longer for the government to start caring about their neighborhood. Those people want to see things “the way they were” more than anyone else, but we can not pretend the Gulf Coast is back to the way it was before the hurricanes hit.

Non-profit organizations and church groups proved themselves to be better at working with local people than the federal government in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Not only did FEMA fail to reach out to those in need, it failed to support the few organizations that already had relationships within the local communities. It is crucial that during future disaster recovery, FEMA identify and communicate with local non-profit partners that can assist them with the overwhelming job ahead. Small organizations should know where they can go to help the people of their neighborhood. It is difficult for East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center because we only have 15 people, but for even smaller groups, it is impossible to get assistance from the state and federal governments. Hurricane Katrina was a lesson that the post-disaster chain-of-command is broken; we now have an opportunity to learn from a bad experience and break the cycle of mistrust.

FEMA's response to the hurricanes was embarrassing, but it will be tragic if the federal government learns nothing from experience. I come before Congress today to stress the importance of a strong, working relationship between FEMA and local non-profit organizations during a future disaster.

Thank you. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

