FEMA Director David Paulison Editorial On Lessons Learned From Katrina

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As we look back on Hurricane Katrina a year later, one thing is clear: We must employ the lessons learned so that when the next disaster strikes we are better prepared to protect lives, prevent suffering, reduce property loss and respond more effectively.

Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history. But we are likely to face others perhaps even more terrible in scope and scale.

How should we get ready for the next disaster -- whether natural or man-made? I believe there are three key areas that warrant discussion: emergency management partnerships, personal preparedness and improving the federal government's ability to respond.

Emergency management is a shared responsibility. All disasters are local, of course, but the federal government must be -- and is -- ready to provide necessary assistance whenever local and state capabilities are overwhelmed.

Hurricane Katrina marked a paradigm shift in the way the Federal Emergency Management Agency will approach its role in emergency management. Traditionally, state and local officials have had primary responsibility during disasters. When their resources are overwhelmed, they seek federal assistance. That's too late.

While emergency management should remain first and foremost a state and local responsibility, the federal government has to be prepared to engage more proactively during the initial stages of a disaster. To do this, we need to enhance partnerships with state and local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector to identify where the weaknesses exist. The federal government should work with states and municipalities to close capability gaps and improve our combined, integrated response. Katrina has taught us the value of early and unified engagement.

Another important component of emergency management is improved personal preparedness.

A recent Harvard survey of Gulf Coast residents revealed that more than 25 percent of participants might ignore a government evacuation order. I am thunderstruck by this complacency; residents who fail to leave risk not only their own lives but those of first responders as well.
Able-bodied people must assume greater responsibility for their safety and that of their loved ones and pets -- especially during the hours immediately after a disaster. The more citizens can take care of themselves and their families during disasters, the more emergency managers will be able to develop plans and allocate resources to those who need them most.

Personal preparedness also applies to minimizing one's exposure to risk. We can reduce our personal vulnerability to hazards if we take the time to learn about the risks we face -- and reduce them. Risk mitigation can also significantly facilitate recovery efforts.

Finally, I'd like to address what FEMA is doing to prepare for the next disaster. It is a small agency with about 2,000 full-time employees working in 10 regions across the country. We rely heavily on temporary staffers during disasters. Since Katrina, we have worked diligently to improve our ability to respond to disasters.

We have concentrated on improving responsiveness, customer service, logistics, debris removal, and partnerships with state and local officials. I have invested heavily in hiring the right leaders with emergency management experience to coordinate federal response efforts. FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security have designated the personnel and technology for dealing with whatever situation arises.

We have greatly improved our capacity to the point that we can register as many as 200,000 disaster victims per day -- more than double what we could handle in 2005 -- and reduced the potential for waste, fraud and abuse. We have tripled our home inspection capacity -- up to 20,000 homes each day after a disaster. We have stockpiled enough food, water and ice to care for as many as 1 million disaster victims for a week. We have enhanced our ability to track and manage the supply chain. In addition, FEMA recently announced significant enhancements to its Digital Emergency Alert System, which will notify citizens of potential public hazards and disasters that strike without notice.

In the year since Katrina, FEMA has provided nearly $6.1 billion directly to some 950,000 households for housing and other aid -- the most provided by the agency for any single natural disaster. We are working aggressively to be more responsive to disaster victims. We have received tremendous support from Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and President Bush.

I am confident FEMA will regain the confidence of Americans, but we can't do it alone. Effective emergency management requires that every element of the community remain vigilant, prepared and ready to respond. This includes state and local governments, voluntary agencies, the private sector and individuals.

Together, we can achieve a world-class emergency response system that will prepare America for the next disaster and significantly improve our ability to respond.