

Backgrounder

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Learning from Disaster: The Role of Federalism and the Importance of Grassroots Response

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In the aftermath of the widespread devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the unsteady response to conditions in New Orleans, some argued to give the federal government a much more intrusive role in meeting future catastrophic emergencies.¹ While improvements in the federal response are necessary, turning responsibility for everything over to Washington is a terrible idea.

Homeland security and disaster management are national, not just federal, missions. The right response to domestic emergencies requires effective action from state and local governments, private-sector and voluntary associations, and communities and individuals, as well as support from federal officials. The best way to ensure cooperation and to meet shared responsibilities is not to put big government in charge.

Federalism has long been the guiding principle for allocating responsibilities to meet the needs of citizens after disasters. Remaining committed to a federalist approach is not just being a slave to tradition. It is a precedent based on practicality and experience. Both scientific research on disaster response and an analysis of recent emergencies argue that it is still the right approach. Many of the best efforts to save lives and safeguard property highlight the vital role that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private-sector initiatives, and individual civic deeds play during extreme emergencies. In fact, they argue that rather than being supplanted by federal oversight, grassroots responses should be the cornerstone of the national effort.

Talking Points

- The federal government's role in disaster preparedness is to meet its own responsibilities, create a national response system that promotes collaborative effort, and support "train the trainer" programs that help communities to build strong grassroots response.
- Specifically, Congress needs to reform the homeland security grant formulas so that allocations are based on risk, not entitlement.
- Congress should require the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services to establish joint groups to promote the development of community-centric planning; assist in providing the necessary infrastructure for the American public to assume a direct and influential role in community-based disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation planning; and develop standards to measure the success of community disaster planning efforts.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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The federal government can best facilitate establishing an effective national response to catastrophic disaster by meeting its own responsibilities, creating a national response system that promotes collaborative effort, and supporting “train the trainer” programs that help communities to build strong grassroots response.

The Constitution and Governance

Embodied in the U.S. Constitution, the principles of limited government and federalism give citizens and local communities the greatest role in shaping their lives. The 10th Amendment states that “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” In matters relating to their communities, local jurisdictions have the preponderance of authority and autonomy. This just makes sense: The people closest to the problem are the ones best equipped to find the best solution.

America’s system for disaster response reflects these principles. The core assumption is that incidents are typically managed best at the lowest possible geographic, organizational, and jurisdictional levels. Several reasons justify this approach.

- **Every community is unique.** Preparedness planning must account for local conditions of culture, geography, language, infrastructure, politics, and numerous other factors.
- **Local communities have the resources.** Since local communities are responsible for public safety, they already have the preponderance of assets that are usually required to deal with problems. Of the millions of emergency responders in the United States—including fire, police, emergency services, utility workers, medical personnel, and volunteer groups—the vast majority work either for or with local communities.

- **Time matters.** In most disasters, the first few hours are critical. Most life-threatening injuries require immediate attention. Since local responders are already in the jurisdiction, they are likely the only personnel that can reach the disaster scene in time to make a difference.
- **Priorities matter.** Large-scale disasters will require states and the federal government to prioritize the allocation of additional resources to help affected communities throughout a region. The more robust the local response, the more aid can be focused on the areas most greatly affected by the disaster.
- **It encourages preparedness.** If local communities are not primarily responsible for disaster response, they will be less likely to invest in the resources and assets needed to safeguard their citizens.

A federalist approach to disaster response for a nation like the United States, with its vast population, wide geographical area, diverse regional conditions, and traditions of strong state and local governments and volunteerism, is the only practical choice.

National planning documents for homeland security adhere to the conviction that the federal government should reinforce—not replace—state, local, and nongovernmental efforts. Federal law, especially the Robert T. Stafford Emergency and Disaster Assistance Act,² and presidential directives embody this tiered approach in which state and local authorities have the initial lead role in managing emergencies within the United States.³

State and local governments devise the emergency response and evacuation plans for their jurisdictions and authorize their implementation. Each state decides for itself the precise delineation of authorities and responsibilities for emergency response

1. For example, see George Lakoff and John Halpin, “Framing Katrina,” *The American Prospect*, October 7, 2005, at www.prospect.org/web/page.www?section=root&name=ViewWeb&articleId=10391 (January 30, 2006).

2. 42 U.S. Code 5121 *et seq.*

3. “The Federal Government recognizes the roles and responsibilities of State and local authorities in domestic incident management. Initial responsibility for managing domestic incidents generally falls on State and local authorities.” George W. Bush, “Management of Domestic Incidents,” Homeland Security Presidential Directive HSPD–5, Section 6, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030228-9.html (January 30, 2006).

between statewide and local public bodies (e.g., municipalities and counties). The common planning assumption is that communities need to manage a local emergency largely by themselves for up to 72 hours until substantial federal assistance can be mobilized and deployed on the scene.

The National Response Plan (NRP) provides the framework for delineating responsibilities during a domestic emergency. The NRP designates which federal agencies and programs are activated in various types of incidents or threat conditions. In particular, it specifies 15 Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) and states which organizations are primarily responsible for coordinating each ESF during an emergency. The NRP also indicates how federal agencies interact with state, local, and tribal governments and the private sector, and it identifies when federal authorities assume control of the national response.⁴

The Constitution, in such clauses as “provide for the common defense,”⁵ recognizes the ultimate role of the federal government in preventing and managing large-scale terrorist attacks and other emergencies. When the scale of an incident exceeds the capacity of state and local actors to respond, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other U.S. government agencies mobilize to provide assistance.⁶ Such intervention requires the President, following an appeal from a state governor, to issue a disaster or emergency declaration that authorizes supplemental federal assistance to the stricken area.

However, even in this case, state bodies retain much authority over the response—and that is the way it should be. As long as state and local governments remain viable and operate within federal law, their sovereign authority to look after their citizens should not be questioned.

National Volunteer Network

Nongovernmental actors such as private businesses and voluntary associations can also make substantial independent contributions. Federal plans describe how Washington interfaces with the private sector and NGOs in the event of disaster. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 states:

The Federal Government recognizes the role that the private and nongovernmental sectors play in preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies. The Secretary [of Homeland Security] will coordinate with the private and nongovernmental sectors to ensure adequate planning, equipment, training, and exercise activities and to promote partnerships to address incident management capabilities.⁷

The plans emphasize the federal government’s role in coordinating national activities, not in directing how and what individual communities do in the event of an emergency.

Although hundreds of national groups may respond to a disaster, the National Response Plan names only two: the American Red Cross and National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD).

- The plan assigns the Red Cross responsibility for coordinating federal mass care assistance (ESF-6) in support of state and local governments. This includes sheltering, feeding, providing emergency first aid, providing human services like counseling, processing benefits, and maintaining the victims registry.
- The NVOAD does not offer direct support to victims. It is an umbrella organization: a coalition of over 40 of the largest groups that pro-

4. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *National Response Plan*, December 2004, at www.dhs.gov/interweb/assetlibrary/NRPbaseplan.pdf (January 30, 2006).

5. U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 8.

6. For more on FEMA’s role, see James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Richard Weitz, Ph.D., “The Truth About FEMA: Analysis and Proposals,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1901, December 7, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg1901.cfm.

7. Bush, “Management of Domestic Incidents,” Section 7.

vide a range of emergency and support services. NVOAD primarily serves before disasters as an information-sharing and planning network for its member organizations. During disasters, it facilitates coordinating their activities with one another.⁸

The role of these national organizations, like the role of the federal government, is supporting—not taking over—local communities.

Grassroots Response

Washington's plans offer a framework for providing national assistance to local communities in times of need, both through state and local governments and through national-level NGOs. They are necessary but not sufficient. They are designed to supplement, not supplant, grassroots responses—and with good reason. Current research on disaster preparedness argues that community-centered disaster preparations are far more effective than Washington-centric planning.

More Effective Planning. A study by the Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health examined how communities would react to two kinds of terrorist attacks: a smallpox outbreak and a dirty bomb explosion. The study found that most extant response plans will not work. Surveys suggested that most individuals would not follow instructions such as reporting to vaccination sites or sheltering-in-place when required.

The study found that most people have common-sense reasons for noncompliance. People have little faith in plans that affect their personal safety and that were developed without their direct involvement. The public has little confidence that the planning of professionals necessarily offers the

best course of action to protect themselves and their families. This is especially true when plans ask them to do things that are counterintuitive, such as not going to school to pick up their children during an emergency. On the other hand, the study found that disaster planning that included input from the community resulted not only in higher quality plans, but also in far higher levels of community approval and confidence in the plans.⁹

More Meaningful Response. Not only does community-centered planning offer better prospects for developing better plans and obtaining greater public support, but grassroots efforts make for more resilient responses in the event of disaster. Indeed, community-centered actions, in which citizens take care of themselves and their neighbors, are more effective and have therapeutic mental health effects. One disaster research study found that when community ties “are strong, supportive, and responsive to the individual's physical and emotional needs, the capacity to withstand and overcome stress is heightened.”¹⁰ Citizens feel more secure and better cared for when they are looked after by members of their own community.

More Versatile Response. Another reason why grassroots responses are essential is that as the scale of the disaster increases, so does the likelihood of confusion and ambiguity. Under these conditions, improvisation and adaptation are crucial to eliciting an effective response, particularly in the first hours and days of a catastrophe before organized responders can reach the scene. Research has found that the communities themselves are the best source of innovation and ingenuity, and the stronger the community, the more resourceful and robust is the nature of its adaptive qualities.¹¹

8. U.S. General Accounting Office, *September 11: More Effective Collaboration Could Enhance Charitable Organizations' Contributions to Disasters*, GAO-03-259, December 19, 2002, at www.gao.gov/new.items/d03259.pdf (January 30, 2006).
9. Roz D. Lasker, “Redefining Readiness: Terrorism Planning Through the Eyes of the Public,” New York Academy of Medicine, September 14, 2004, at www.cacsh.org/pdf/RedefiningReadinessStudy.pdf (January 30, 2006).
10. Charles E. Fritz, “Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies,” University of Delaware, Disaster Research Center, 1996, p. 78.
11. Gary R. Webb, Michael Beverly, Megan McMichael, James Noon, and Tabitha Patterson, “Role Improvising Under Conditions of Uncertainty: A Classification of Types,” University of Delaware, Disaster Research Center *Preliminary Paper* No. 289, 1999, at www.udel.edu/DRC/Preliminary_Papers/pp289.pdf (January 30, 2006).

America in Action

The efficacy of grassroots response was demonstrated in the wake of Katrina. National-level organizations—not just the federal government, but nongovernmental agencies such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army—proved unable to mobilize an effective response. They lacked adequate situational awareness of local needs and the means to deploy the right resources to the right place at the right time to do the right thing.

In contrast, local communities in many cases provided the most effective response. One district in Louisiana had 40 operating shelters in the immediate aftermath of the storm, and less than 10 were Red Cross shelters. Tens of thousands of people were sheltered and fed by local efforts.

“The best job,” argued Representative Jim McCrery (R-LA), was done by “ordinary people who came out of their homes and bought diapers and pillows and blankets and food and stayed at the high school gymnasium or wherever, the civic center in some small town and cooked for the people who were there, who gave them rides to the Social Security office to make sure they got their checks.”¹² Additionally, local faith-based organizations responded quickly and effectively by providing facilities and resources and by mobilizing volunteers. Louisiana residents affected by these two storms generally rated the assistance provided by private sources such as nonprofit, community, and faith-based organizations substantially higher than assistance from federal, state, and local governments and national organizations like the Red Cross.¹³

Such views are not exceptional. Traditionally, local churches provide immediate assistance to a

stricken area, the American Red Cross takes the lead in providing emergency relief a few days later, and other charities (many from the affected community itself) then focus on long-run recovery.

In the aftermath of Katrina, the grassroots response proved especially important. Overwhelmed American Red Cross personnel required an exceptionally long time to service many of the smaller, often rural Gulf Coast communities and declined to operate in some locations when they feared for the safety of their volunteers and the victims (e.g., because of fear of strong winds or unsanitary conditions).¹⁴ Government agencies also found it difficult to provide timely assistance to all residents of the many devastated areas. Private civic efforts (often local churches) filled many of these gaps through countless, if often unrecorded, acts of generosity. In cooperation with neighbors, friends, and fellow sufferers, victims also organized to help themselves—a step that mental health professionals consider essential to overcoming feelings of powerlessness and trauma.¹⁵

The Not-So-Local Community

Since New Orleans has an unusually large number of long-term residents, they perhaps found it easier to form self-help networks than would communities with more transient inhabitants. On the other hand, local newspapers throughout the United States reported how myriad groups organized to help to fill the gap by collecting money, food, clothing, and other supplies; sending them to stricken regions; and distributing them to Katrina victims, either in the Gulf Coast states or wherever they had been evacuated. Although they lacked the resources available to government agencies, their

12. *To Review the Response by Charities to Hurricane Katrina*, hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, 109th Cong., 1st Sess., December 13, 2005, at <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/hearings.asp?formmode=view&id=4682> (March 17, 2006).

13. Audrey Hudson, “Storm Victims Praise Churches,” *The Washington Times*, December 2, 2005, at www.washingtontimes.com/national/20051201-114736-6989r.htm (March 15, 2006).

14. Stephanie Strom and Campbell Robertson, “As Its Coffers Swell, Red Cross Is Criticized on Gulf Coast Response,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2005, p. A24.

15. See Marianne Szegedy-Maszak, “Shattered Lives,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 3, 2005, pp. 50–54, and Cynthia Fagnoni, testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, December 13, 2005.

smaller size and innovative approaches often allowed them to respond more flexibly than their larger, more established partners.¹⁶

As after the terrorist attacks on September 11 and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, large corporations and small enterprises donated hundreds of millions of dollars in cash, goods, and services after Katrina and Rita. Umbrella associations such as the Business Roundtable played an important role in connecting companies seeking to provide assistance with points of contact in government and nongovernmental sectors.¹⁷ For example, Wal-Mart provided 2,500 trailers of emergency supplies within the first three weeks of the disaster. In some cases, local Wal-Mart managers organized their stores as caches of supplies for local responders and disaster victims.¹⁸

Modern communications technologies such as the Internet also facilitated the development of virtual communities among concerned people. Many commercial Web sites (including Amazon, Google, MSN, and Yahoo) offered visitors the opportunity to donate cash to hurricane victims with just a few clicks of a mouse.

In addition to the corporate response, Korean, Hispanic, Vietnamese, and African-American media and local activist groups around the country were especially active in mobilizing support for fellow ethnic people affected by the disaster. Fearful of dealing with the federal government, illegal immigrants came to depend heavily on such private assistance.

Indeed, in 21st century America, the “local” community is defined by more than just geographic proximity. As one research study found, in modern urban societies, “people’s personal communities often transcend time and space and the traditional categories of [geographic and demographic] groups.”¹⁹ These extended communities, whether based on corporate responsibility, social action, or individual initiative, are also an important part of the grassroots response.

Learning from Katrina

The worst reaction to the aftermath of Katrina would be to adopt a more heavy-handed federalized approach, which would undercut the very kinds of responses that proved the most effective. This is not to say that Washington’s response does not need to be improved significantly. The federal government has a unique and important role to play. Only the federal government can build a national response system of the kind needed in a catastrophic disaster (like Katrina) to mobilize the resources of the nation in the face of a disaster that immediately overwhelms local leaders and puts tens of thousands of lives at risk.²⁰

The federal government is also responsible for building the “plugs” that allow state and local government to “plug” into the system. This includes training, education, planning, interoperable communications, and effective information sharing.²¹ Beyond that, the federal government should focus federal dollars on building up the federal assets needed to respond to catastrophic disasters.

16. Many of their contributions are recounted in William Schambra, “Katrina and the American Idea of Community,” *Philanthropy*, forthcoming.
17. Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Stepping Up: Corporate Efforts for the Stricken Gulf Are Unprecedented,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2005, p. F1, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300253.html (March 16, 2006).
18. Jason Jackson, testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, U.S. Senate, November 16, 2005.
19. Charles E. Fritz, “Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies,” University of Delaware, Disaster Research Center *Historical and Comparative Disaster Series* No. 10, 1996, p. 78, at www.udel.edu/DRC/preliminary/handc10.pdf (February 21, 2006).
20. For recommendations on improving the federal response to catastrophic disasters, see James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., “Improving the National Response to Catastrophic Disaster,” testimony before the Committee on Government Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, September 15, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/tst091505a.cfm.

As part of the federal effort, more can be done to improve Washington's support for building grassroots responses.²² The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should:

- **Create regional outreach offices.** The country needs a national homeland security system that mobilizes public safety officials and state and local governments as effective partners in emergency response. For more effective coordination among these different levels of government and the private sector, the DHS should create regional field offices as required by the Homeland Security Act of 2002. Among their primary duties, the regional offices should work with state and local officials to encourage strong community-based efforts.²³
- **Deemphasize national preparedness programs.** Initiatives like Ready.gov and National Preparedness Month are redundant to programs run by the American Red Cross and will never be as effective as programs run by communities with the participation and leadership of local citizens.
- **Train the trainers.** The DHS can help state and local communities develop a culture of preparedness by helping them to establish training programs for state and local leaders, who in turn can work to help develop strong community-centered programs.

For its part, Congress should:

- **Reform the grant formulas.** Washington's approach to funding state and local security has been flawed from the start. The Patriot Act

requires a significant portion of homeland security grants to be divided among the states without regard to need or risk. As a result, 40 percent of the state grants are simply entitlements. As the 9/11 Commission's report accurately stated, the current system is in danger of turning homeland security grants into "pork barrel funding."²⁴ Grants should be based on risk, vulnerability, and national priorities, not on past funding or state population. Congress should repeal or substantially reduce the congressionally mandated state minimums. This would allow available funds to be used to build a national response system that supports state and local efforts and encourages communities to look after their own needs rather than wait on Washington.

- **Require the DHS and the Department of Health and Human Services to establish joint working groups.** These groups should (1) promote the development of community-centric planning; (2) help state and local officials provide the necessary means and infrastructure for the American public to volunteer to assume a direct and influential role in community-based disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation planning efforts; and (3) develop standards to measure the success of community disaster planning efforts.

Conclusion

Preparedness and response programs run by Washington bureaucrats that diminish the role and responsibilities of state and local governments will

21. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 describes the kind of national effort that is required. Under its auspices, the DHS is establishing national performance standards, developing the means to measure readiness and allocating funds based on national priorities. See James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., "Homeland Security Dollars and Sense #4: An End to Pork Barrel Security Grants?" Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 962, January 23, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/wm962.cfm.

22. James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., "Beyond Duct Tape: The Federal Government's Role in Public Preparedness," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 971, June 3, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/em971.cfm.

23. Edwin Meese III, James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Richard Weitz, Ph.D., "Organizing for Victory: Proposals for Building a Regional Homeland Security Structure," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1817, January 21, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg1817.cfm.

24. Chairman Thomas H. Kean and Vice Chairman Lee H. Hamilton, remarks on Final Report of the 9/11 Public Discourse Project, December 5, 2005, p. 2, at www.9-11pdp.org/press/2005-12-05_statement.pdf (March 16, 2006).

not make Americans safer. Instead, they will waste tax dollars and divert the DHS from tasks that would make a difference.

Federal, state, and local governments need to work together to encourage, not supplant, community-centered programs. As with many other homeland security missions, applying—rather than trying to circumvent—the principles of federalism usually produces the best results.

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