Faces reflecting despair. Eyes flashing with anger. Tears indicating fear, helplessness, confusion, and who knows what else. These images will forever remain part of the legacy of the response to Hurricane Katrina. For, despite all the talk, all the seminars and workshops, all the dollars spent, this response was unacceptable. And it will take the emergency-management (EM) community some time to regain the loss of credibility.

Of course, some credibility was regained three weeks after Katrina’s blast when another monster storm—Hurricane Rita—exploded in the Gulf. On the heels of Katrina, as weather experts pointed to the most probable “zone of uncertainty,” who would stay home? But when thousands from the East Texas and Western Louisiana coastlines headed inland, they confronted long lines of traffic that barely crept along, if at all. Still, despite Rita’s massive destruction and a less than perfect evacuation, reporters, politicians, and others were quick to point out that “the system” worked better this time around.

In coming months—maybe years—as the 9/11 Commission is remembered, there will be dozens of “after action” reports, interagency critiques, and formal hearings at all levels of government and in numerous communities. Facts will be determined in numerous civil and criminal court proceedings as the actions, intentions, and judgments of a wide variety of individuals—from nursing home owners to looters—are examined in minute detail.

It is not the purpose of this essay to speculate on the outcome of these actions—they have yet to occur. Nor is the purpose to second guess what specific conclusions might be drawn. Rather, my aim is to bring a perspective on the disaster response that is possible only by one familiar with the past. It is the perspective of one who was acutely disappointed by the needless suffering of thousands of US citizens in the days following the landfall of both Katrina and Rita. This disappointment was heightened by faces from New Orleans in particular—faces that peered out for days from our television sets, computer monitors, daily newspapers, and weekly news magazines.

By reviewing the hurricane response based on such a perspective, it is my hope that emergency managers can juxtapose their own assessments of the big picture and ponder the specific implications for their own communities and programs. By combining this type of analysis with a thorough review of the more focused organizational, administrative, and procedural recommendations that are surely to come, we all can better rebuild trust in, and legitimacy for, our emerging profession.

“THEY SHOULD HAVE LEFT”

At first, there was relief. Louisiana had been spared the worst-case scenario. Katrina had turned to the east ever so slightly, but it was enough to prevent a direct hit on “the Big Easy.” And she had weakened. No longer a Category 5 hurricane with winds in excess of 165 miles per hour, she came
ashore as a Category 4. Although damage would occur throughout the southeastern parishes, towns to the east would take the worst of Katrina’s force, both in wind gusts and water surges. Mississippi casinos and other structures in places like Biloxi and Gulfport would be shaken and tossed, some obliterated. Others in Alabama and even the western tip of the Florida panhandle would experience some of Katrina’s wrath, but New Orleans would be spared. Or so it seemed.

Within hours after the hurricane, however, “the bowl” began to fill. With levees breached in several locations, the water was encroaching. As the water rose, those who chose not to leave were trapped. Some managed to reach locations like the Superdome, although it was already beyond the capacity anticipated by emergency planners. Others retreated to upper floors in their homes only to see the water continue to rise up around them. Heroic rescue missions by both officials and neighbors saved thousands from probable death as they were plucked from attics and rooftops.

Weeks later, in the aftermath of Hurricane Rita in Texas, many would point to places like Galveston and Houston and emphasize the minimal number of rescues required due to evacuations. Many also would note the mitigating effects of voluntary evacuations to the east. In rural areas and small towns along both the Texas and Louisiana coastlines, hundreds of citizens were saved days of discomfort and possible death from the flooding brought by Rita. These scenes, along with a vague awareness of the rescue costs, led some to react to the New Orleans debacle with a familiar chant: “They were warned; they should have left!”

As the weeks progressed and the trauma of the scenes of suffering began to dim, most people outside the impacted areas continued with their daily lives. Only when occasional news reports of recovery issues and costs were aired would they return to the scenes that had so captivated them previously. Gradually, all that remained was a vague memory of people who were warned but who didn’t leave. “Guess there will always be those who just won’t listen,” which translates deep inside the head as “damned fools.”

We are left with a stark reality. While exact numbers will fluctuate over the next several months, the death toll is simply unacceptable. This is to say nothing of the inhumane and stressful experiences of thousands who were seeking to find safety.

Lessons from the past put all of this into perspective. In 1976, my home state of Colorado suffered a terrible but much more focused disaster. Following a sudden but severe rainstorm, a flash flood in the Big Thompson Canyon 65 miles northwest of Denver left at least 139 dead. A local sheriff correctly pointed to the heroism of many, including one state trooper who made the ultimate sacrifice. He and others had risked their lives to warn those located within this area of scenic beauty, which had quickly become a death trap. Then, as now, we heard, “We warned them, but they wouldn’t leave.” As I said at the time, “Sheriff, isn’t it your responsibility to see to it that you have a warning system in place that actually works? Don’t blame the victims!”

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Since the Big Thompson flood (and even before that, really) a great deal has been learned about disaster warnings and evacuation behavior. Among the lessons backed by hundreds of specific scientific findings, consider these key identified responses:

- **Disbelief.** The initial response to any warning message is disbelief. All of us believe we are safe, and it takes a lot of information to get us to take protective action—especially if the threat is a future projection.

- **Message characteristics.** The greater the clarity, precision, certainty, and trustworthiness of the source, the more likely the message will be acted on. Furthermore, if specific adaptive actions are provided in the message (e.g., “Leave now, and move inland at least as far as Austin”), the likelihood is greater that people will take action.

- **Receiver characteristics.** Identical warning messages are perceived and acted
on differently by groups, as reflects their range of social experiences. Following Katrina, many told news reporters that they were quicker to leave when news of Rita arrived. Others, noting the slow-moving traffic out of Houston prior to Rita’s landfall, decided against leaving. Still others, who experienced 12 to 14 or more hours in their cars, may be less likely to leave next time.

However, personal experience is only one of several important social constraints affecting evacuation behavior. We know that elderly residents are less likely to leave what they perceive is a safe home. We know that those who are poor will more likely delay leaving or stay until the last minute because they lack the money, transportation, or even gasoline to leave. And we know that many ethnic minorities have experienced years of subtle—and not so subtle—discrimination that has heightened feelings of distrust, disenfranchisement, and fear—all of which culminate into a paralysis of inertia that simply cannot be penetrated by mass-media warnings and announcements.

Social contexts. Almost always, it is groups—not individuals—who evacuate. Having a physically challenged child or parent within the household is a daily social constraint. In times of disaster, these constraints cause some to drown in their homes despite dozens of televised warning messages. In addition, for years it has been documented that people are most reluctant to leave behind their pets. Fortunately, the Mayor of Galveston observed this reality during the Katrina response and publicly announced a new policy prior to Rita’s landfall. “Take your pets with you. We will make arrangements for them.” This is a first step toward building a warning system that will work rather than continuing to chant, “We warned them, but they wouldn’t leave.”

KEY LESSONS

Coming on the heels of the fictional scenario of “Pam,” Hurricanes Katrina and Rita taught Louisiana emergency managers and other involved officials that preparedness without implementation yields failure. So what are the key lessons to build upon from these hurricane responses?

Do not delay

If public officials are reluctant to announce mandatory evacuation directives, significant segments of the population will remain at risk. And, as with the distribution of risk in our stratified society every day, a disproportionate number of those most vulnerable to disasters will be the old, the poor, and ethnic minorities. Every effort must be made to avoid false alarms; however, they will occur in the future. Our technology, while good, is not perfect. So, some new thinking is in order. When the next false alarm occurs, why not a financial reward for those who can document that they left? Especially given current fuel prices, a tax credit for a tank or two of gas would be a symbolic way of saying to our citizens, “Yes, you did the right thing. And next time, we want you to do it again.” This is only one of many incentives that should be considered. Creative thinking is required to devise policies that would reward the poor for leaving, e.g., coupons for future food or gasoline purchases.

The point is not to make false-alarm responses into any more of a negative experience than they have to be. Even token rewards may blunt the power of this type of social constraint. We don’t want future disaster warnings to be ineffectual or simply ignored altogether.

Know your community

Special actions and incentives are required for those with special needs, both physical and social. Transportation can be provided, and those most
reluctant to go should receive additional warnings from sources other than TV and cops. Don’t send police vans—normally used to haul people to the pokey—into low-income areas and then be surprised when they reject your offer of rescue. That example stems from an earlier event and not (at least to my knowledge) the recent hurricanes, but it makes the point.

It is the responsibility of the emergency manager and other local and state officials to gain increased insight into the forms of social constraints that lead some to choose to stay when danger threatens. All people make the choice whether to flee or stay. But some look at the world through a straw that narrows their vision and severely limits their capacity for choice. Thinking beyond the immediate is difficult at best. Often, it is so terrifying that it is far easier not to choose at all. Without hope, choice is seen as a fiction. And, for most of the poor, hope is a fleeting experience if they know it at all. Greater understanding of this consequence of poverty must become an explicit goal within the EM community if we are to maximize evacuation compliance.

Encourage alternative shelter locations

While public shelters in safe locations will always be needed and are often close by, many people contact friends or relatives regarding a possible stay when a potential disaster looms. Use of this option could be expanded rapidly with official encouragement.7 “If you have a friend or relative residing in the threatened area, we urge you to contact them immediately and offer them shelter.” If such efforts were implemented with enough advance notice, who knows how much more frequently relocating might be pursued? In addition, every family that opts to stay with friends or relatives is one less that might require future rescue or public sheltering. Talk about a cost-effective policy!

Be certain of transportation

Of all of the scenes from Katrina, one of the most upsetting was the crowds waiting at the Superdome and Convention Center. There they stood, waiting for busses, hour after hour after hour. Preliminary review of local and state evacuation plans clearly suggests the failure was one of implementation rather than simply preparedness.8

Obviously, this is a complex matter that future policy reviews will examine in detail. Regardless of circumstances or future finger pointing, the lesson for others is clear. You must provide transportation and all of its related components (e.g., vehicles, drivers, fuel), and it must be at hand and under your direct control. Even when other local and state resources are inadequate, as will be the case in future catastrophic events, this priority must not be lost. The cost-to-benefit ratio is obvious.

Again, some perspective. Shortly after the evacuations triggered by Hurricane Bret in August 1999, I conducted extensive interviews with officials in Corpus Christi and Kleberg County, TX.9 As in many other places where such threats are anticipated, local first responders had agreements with state officials whereby traffic lanes would be made one-way if needed. In the case of Bret, however, traffic out of Corpus Christi backed up for miles as local officials awaited the implementation promised. Surely after Katrina and Rita, future implementation of “contra flow,” or whatever it might be called, will occur more quickly and effectively.

Perhaps the most obvious proactive measure to facilitate evacuation by vehicle is the prepositioning of fuel trucks. Any driver or filling-station operator should be advised repeatedly throughout an evacuation period of a specialized telephone number whereby help for those running low on fuel or experiencing mechanical problems can be obtained.

Individual and family preparedness

Through schools, fairs, media campaigns, and a multitude of other settings, many have gotten the message: “You and your family must be responsible for your safety and well-being for 48 to 72 hours after a major disaster.” Certainly, this message must be continued as should the specifics of what it really means. Yet the number of poor and elderly citizens in our society increases daily—and the message is not reaching them. Individual and family disaster preparedness must be adapted to this social reality. It is hard to think of a backpack for storage of disaster supplies when you don’t have one for everyday use.
As most communities have an increase in the number of elderly residents, important disaster preparedness augmentations must be made for this group as well. These will range from heightened disaster planning requirements for nursing home operators to transportation safety rules for transporting portable containers of oxygen.

CONCLUSION

These ideas are just the tip of the iceberg. We can’t curtail the increasing numbers of poor and elderly who will be at risk in our society, especially over the next several decades, as baby boomers reach retirement age and beyond. But poverty can, and must, be reduced for all age groups. When viewed within the context of individual and family disaster preparedness, this goal becomes one of national strategic importance. Many of us would claim that it is truly a matter of national security. So, when we discover that a family living in urban squalor has not assembled a “disaster kit” or made a “preparedness plan,” let us not be surprised. Let us not, once again, blame the victim. For the real lesson of Katrina and Rita is that we have seen the victim—and it is us.

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