

MONDAY, AUGUST 28, 2006

# LIEBERMAN FAULTS FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FOR LINGERING EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Monday said that much remains to be done to restore a sense of normalcy for the victims of last year's Hurricane Katrina. In a speech before a group of Connecticut first responders who answered the call of duty last year to aid the hurricane's victims, Lieberman said more than 200,000 people are still living in trailers, tents, or unfinished homes in Louisiana and too many of them lack access to health care, public schools, and the jobs they need to get back on their feet.

In addition, Lieberman announced the findings of a new Department of Homeland Security Inspector General report which shows the department's urban search and rescue teams to be woefully unprepared.

"A year after Hurricane Katrina, this is completely unacceptable to me – and must be completely unsettling to all the first responders here," Lieberman said. "These are the federal teams that first responders...are supposed to rely on in a catastrophe – whether it's a hurricane, a flood, or a terrorist attack."

Lieberman and Committee Chairman Susan Collins, R-Me., successfully led the Committee to approve legislation that would provide victims of catastrophic disasters with double the amount of assistance than is available from FEMA

under current law, enable FEMA to pay for transporting disaster victims back home after being evacuated, and promote the use of alternative permanent or semi-permanent housing, rather than travel trailers. It also would require FEMA to fund more comprehensive mental health services, which is clearly a critical need.

“This critical legislation should have been passed months ago. But it is stuck in yet another partisan stalemate in Congress,” Lieberman said. “This fall I will be working to break through the gridlock to get the victims of Katrina – our fellow Americans – back into homes, back into jobs, back into schools and back on their feet.”

Following is the Senator’s full statement:

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the many Connecticut heroes who went to the Gulf Coast to support the relief and rescue efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

I know not all of these individuals could be here today, but I would like to read the names of those we know about and thank them for their service. In what we know were very tough times, they answered the call of duty.

And as I look out at all of you, I am reminded that there is no such thing as an every day hero, but rather people like you – firefighters, police, EMTs, Red Cross workers – who are heroes every day, ready to run toward danger to save the lives of your fellow citizens.

We owe each and every one of you our gratitude for each and every day you are ready to protect us.

Today we gather to commemorate the anniversary of one of the most devastating natural disasters in American history and to take stock of the unnatural governmental disasters that followed.

A year ago today, at precisely 10 a.m., New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the evacuation of New Orleans, saying that Hurricane Katrina was approaching as – I quote – the “storm most of us have long feared.”

Yes, Katrina was the storm that was long feared and long predicted.

But it turned out to be prophecy without meaning, for despite all the warnings over all those years, what Americans saw unfold in the aftermath of Katrina was the blatant failure of government at all levels to fulfill its most basic duty – to prepare to protect the welfare of its people.

The across-the-board incompetence of Uncle Sam in preparing for and responding to Mother Nature was completely inexcusable. And every American, not just the victims in the Gulf Region, had every right to be furious at the federal government's failures. Because it was all of our tax dollars that were not at work. And because there but for the grace of God could have gone any one of us, our families, our communities.

Some in Washington thought the solution was just to point fingers of blame. Well, there was plenty of blame to go around, but we needed more than that. We needed to ask tough questions and get honest answers. We needed to expose the breakdowns to prevent them from happening again, not vilify the people who made them. And we needed to put aside partisan politics to fix the problems we found.

That's exactly what we did on the Senate Homeland Security Committee. Together with my Republican Chairman, Senator Susan Collins of Maine, we led an exhaustive, no-holds-barred, and truly non-partisan investigation into what went wrong, and we found no level of government without fault. We put forward 88 specific recommendations for how to make the system work better as part of our 800-page report. And I am proud to say that the Senate overwhelmingly adopted the heart of our reform plan, and recently passed legislation to fundamentally remake FEMA and build a true national emergency management system with the resources, expertise, capabilities, and integration with state and local officials to effectively respond to future catastrophes. So we are making some progress implementing the lessons learned from government's failures in Katrina.

But it's hard to feel too good about those accomplishments when we continue to see so many Gulf Region victims continue to suffer the consequences of the Bush Administration's mismanagement.

After all the scrutiny, all the pledges to do better, more than 200,000 people in Louisiana are still living in trailers or unfinished homes. In fact, many of them are living in tents pitched in the front yards of what used to be their home. And too many of them lack access to health care, to public schools, and to the jobs they need to get back on their feet.

To help right these wrongs, our committee has approved legislation that provides victims of catastrophic disasters with double the amount of assistance than is available from FEMA under current law, with 39 weeks of disaster unemployment insurance, and other benefits. It would enable FEMA to pay for transporting disaster victims back home after being evacuated, and promote the use of alternative permanent or semi-permanent housing, rather than travel

trailers. It also requires FEMA to fund more comprehensive mental health services, which is clearly a critical need for many for whom the emotional toll of Katrina has been overwhelming.

This critical legislation should have been passed months ago. But it is stuck in yet another partisan stalemate in Congress. This fall I will be working to break through the gridlock to get the victims of Katrina – our fellow Americans – back into homes, back into jobs, back into schools and back on their feet.

Even then our work will not be done. That is made painfully clear by a report issued in Washington today by the Homeland Security Department's Inspector General's Office which concludes that FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Teams are still woefully unprepared to handle the next disaster, just as we enter the most active part of the Hurricane Season. The IG investigated seven of FEMA's 28 search and rescue teams and found that six of the seven were operating below 50 percent capacity and that the problems – and I quote – “appear systemic and need FEMA's attention.”

A year after Hurricane Katrina, this is completely unacceptable to me – and must be completely unsettling to all the first responders here. These are the federal teams that first responders, like you, are supposed to rely on in a catastrophe – whether it's a hurricane, a flood or a terrorist attack.

FEMA must fix this – urgently. And we need to commit ourselves to strengthening the capabilities of our first responders here and across the nation because when disaster strikes – as we saw in both Hurricane Katrina and 9-11 – you are the first and often most critical line of defense.

I have spent much of the last five years fighting to convince this Administration to get more federal funding for the nation's first responders, who far too often don't have the training, equipment and manpower they need to respond to a catastrophe.

But despite these dangers Katrina exposed, the President proposed cutting DHS's first responder funding by \$610 million for next year.

These cuts include slashing FIRE Act grants by 46 percent – the same program that last year helped the Fairfield Fire Department buy the personal protective equipment you need to do your jobs.

The President also wanted to totally eliminate the SAFER program, which, as you know, helps with the hiring and training of new firefighter recruits. We need to be strengthening these investments, not cutting them. I fought hard, along side

colleagues of both parties to save these programs and last month the Senate passed a homeland security appropriations bill that restores much, though not all of the funds the President wanted to cut.

Katrina also showed how absolutely critical it is to upgrade the communications systems of first responders around the country. In the midst of that disaster, responders from one jurisdiction often had no way to communicate with responders from another jurisdiction. And as the force of the hurricane knocked out cell phone towers and telephone switching stations – and the batteries on police and fire radios wore down and couldn't be recharged because the electricity was also knocked out – communications began to fail entirely.

With this challenge in mind, I sponsored legislation that would provide \$3.3 billion over five years to help states and local first responders build emergency communications systems that can talk to each other and continue working in a catastrophe. Again, one of my top priorities this fall will be to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to get this job done – and get you, first responders and preventers the tools you need to succeed for us.

As I said in the beginning, today we mark the sad anniversary of another day in American history that will live in infamy. Let us work together to show that we have learned the painful lessons of Katrina, that our leaders at every level of government must be ready to lead, to protect the safety of our people in a catastrophe, and that our first responders have the equipment, training, and resources you need to make that happen.

Our government owes you and our people at least that.

Thank you.