

TUESDAY, APRIL 17, 2007

LIEBERMAN, COLLINS SEEK GAO ANALYSIS OF MASS CARE CAPABILITIES IN A MAJOR DISASTER

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., and six other lawmakers are asking the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to evaluate the impact of a fundamental change in how the federal government will coordinate mass care under the National Response Plan (NRP) after a major disaster.

Mass care is the provision of food, shelter, or assistance to victims of a catastrophic incident.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has decided that it should serve as the “primary agency” for coordinating federal mass care support provided to local and state governments and non-governmental organizations—a mission currently assigned to the American Red Cross (ARC). FEMA will now work more directly with volunteer or faith-based organizations including ARC, the Salvation Army, United Way of America, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Catholic Charities USA – all national level, non-governmental groups that belong to the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD).

In a letter to GAO Comptroller David Walker, the legislators ask GAO to evaluate the impact of FEMA’s decision on ARC and the four other major voluntary organizations that local, state and federal agencies rely on to help provide food, shelter or assistance to disaster victims.

The letter also asks GAO to determine the “concrete actions, investments, or changes in procedures” that the voluntary organizations have made since Hurricane Katrina to accommodate elderly, disabled or special needs groups in mass care shelters.

On February 21, 2007, FEMA and the ARC agreed that the nation’s largest disaster relief organization would become a “support” agency for mass care along with other federal agencies and the NVOAD.

The details of the new federal approach to mass care are subject to final approval. But a draft of proposed revisions to the NRP circulated to federal agencies in March would add a new mass care responsibility of providing “emergency assistance” in general population shelters and an explicit requirement that agencies and non-governmental organizations provide for the “functional needs” of elderly, disabled, and special needs populations and those without transportation.

Following is full text of the letter, which was also signed by Senators Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., Herb Kohl, D-Wisc., and Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., and Congressmen Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and David Price, D-N.C.

April 2, 2007

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

On February 21, 2007, the American Red Cross (ARC) provided the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs with copies of correspondence with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that reflects a decision to end the organization’s role as the primary agency for mass care under Emergency Support Function 6 of the National Response Plan (NRP). This decision represents a potentially significant change that will shift additional responsibility to FEMA for ensuring that mass care is provided in the event of a major disaster in the United States. The American Red Cross will remain a support agency for mass care under the NRP, thus joining the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), an umbrella organization of major non-governmental voluntary organizations, that is also a support agency for mass care.

The American Red Cross is a critical national asset, an organization made up largely of volunteers who respond to about 60,000 large and small disasters each year. This change in the NRP reflects a candid assessment by the American Red Cross of its strengths and weaknesses and vindication of findings in the June 2006 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) entitled Hurricane Katrina and Rita: Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Should be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season.

This is a request that GAO update the findings and recommendations of the June 2006 report and build on the work that GAO has continued to pursue under the authority of the Comptroller General. We ask that GAO now focus on the American Red Cross and four other major voluntary organizations that provided a large share of the support for victims of Hurricane Katrina: the Salvation Army, the United Way of America, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Catholic Charities USA. Together with the American Red Cross, these organizations are members of NVOAD.

We ask that GAO now focus on the role of NVOAD and the five major voluntary organizations that together share the burdens of providing support for mass care and recovery operations. Understanding that GAO has limited audit and access authority relating to these organizations and their activities, we ask that GAO address the following questions and provide the following information:

1. Is NVOAD an effective and fully-functioning national coordinating organization that is equipped to carry out its designated function under Emergency Support Function 6? Has NVOAD improved in concrete ways the ability of the five major organizations to coordinate and align their capabilities to provide mass care and recovery support after a major disaster or catastrophic event? Are each of the five major organizations full participants in NVOAD? What actions have the five major voluntary organizations taken to improve their partnerships and enhance data-sharing efforts under the Coordinated Assistance Network? What are the cost, policy and implementation issues associated with the change in the role of the American Red Cross under ESF-6? How, if at all, will the change alter the roles and responsibilities of the other four major organizations and NVOAD during a major disaster and their working relationship with the American Red Cross and FEMA? What are GAO's recommendations to ensure effective implementation of changes in the ESF-6 that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has decided to adopt?

2. What is the current state of operational readiness of the five major organizations? In particular, what steps has the Red Cross taken to prepare for implementing its responsibilities under the Catastrophic Incident Supplement? What are these organizations' capabilities, financial resources, strengths,

weakness, and areas of disaster response expertise? What are the significant differences between the major organizations and how does each define its role and responsibilities after a major disaster or catastrophic incident? What concrete steps has each organization taken since Hurricane Katrina to improve coordination and alignment of their capabilities with the other four organizations? To what extent has each organization engaged in operational planning with FEMA or the other major organizations during the last 12 months? To what extent have the five major organizations developed procedures to share resources or financial contributions with each other or other voluntary organizations in an effort to improve disaster services? With respect to financial resources, voluntary organizations that provided services after Katrina in some cases encountered substantial difficulties in obtaining reimbursement from FEMA. What steps has FEMA taken to improve the reimbursement process for voluntary organizations after disasters?

3. While states and localities have the primary responsibility for assisting disabled and elderly individuals after a major disaster or catastrophic event, what role have the five major National VOAD members played in addressing the needs of these individuals? What were the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina regarding mass care for the disabled and elderly? What concrete actions, investments, or changes in procedures, if any, have these organizations taken to respond to lessons learned, such as the findings and recommendations of the National Council on Disabilities report, "The Impact of Hurricane Katrina and Rita on People with Disabilities: A Look Back and Remaining Challenges" and the Appleseed Foundation's multi-volume report, "Appleseed Hurricane Katrina Project"?

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Jim McGee on Senator Lieberman's staff at 202-224-2627, Dean Zerbe on Senator Grassley's staff at 202-224-4515, Cherri Branson on Congressman Thompson's staff at 202-226-2616, and Shalanda Young on Congressman Price's staff at 202-226-9817.

Sincerely,

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