

**“Challenges in a Catastrophe: Evacuating New Orleans in
Advance of Hurricane Katrina**

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By

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Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am honored to have the opportunity to appear before you this morning to discuss the problems inherent in evacuating the metropolitan New Orleans Area. It is an issue that all emergency planners and response personnel—local, state and federal-- have focused on during the last ten years. Please allow me now to provide some historical background for this problem.

In 1992 when Hurricane Andrew slammed into the Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana coasts, it not only devastated those coasts, it also caused all the plans emergency managers had developed for evacuation of those coastal states to be scraped. Andrew demonstrated that “vertical evacuation,” which was the major evacuation tool operational in those plans,

was not an acceptable solution. From that time forward, all of the Gulf coast states, and a significant number of the Atlantic coast states, would be forced to physically evacuate their coastal populations. The only remaining functional question was the distance from the coastline required to move the population to ensure that they would survive.

Immediately, therefore, new plans were drafted, evacuation studies were commissioned by Federal and State agencies, and strategies were discussed and developed which would provide for the actual physical movement of the effected population. This effort was further complicated by the fact that the American National Red Cross began implementing a policy of “not sheltering individuals” in recognized flood inundation zones. In Louisiana, these new plans and strategies demanded that the majority of the population of the most densely populated region of the state be moved (approximately 1.2 million individuals). And furthermore, this population had to be moved a minimum of 35 miles to assure that they would leave the flood inundation zone as documented by the FEMA and US Army Corps of Engineers’ SLOSH (Sea, Lake, Overland Surge from Hurricanes) models.

The point I wish to emphasize is that from 1992 forward, all agencies of the local, state and federal governments knew that actual physical evacuation was necessary to guarantee the safety of the New Orleans Metropolitan area. Furthermore, beginning in 1994, the evacuation studies ordered by both the State and the USACOE recognized that a significant portion of the population of the area did not have adequate means of transportation which would allow them to evacuate the area. In addition, these same studies recognized that it would take a minimum of 60 hours to have a real chance of evacuating this population. Simply put, everyone involved realized the enormity of the task contemplated, and that special strategies would be necessary.

In the decade leading up to the now infamous Hurricane Pam exercise, numerous officials of all government agencies addressed the enormity of the task. Following on Hurricane Georges in 1998, (a near-miss wake-up call for the New Orleans metro area), the Southeast Louisiana Hurricane Task Force and the Louisiana State Police updated the evacuation plan for Southeast Louisiana and included within it, for the first time, the contra-flow strategy in an attempt to reduce the clearance time necessary for the area. Although all involved with this first contra-flow plan believed that it would

shave a few hours off the clearance time, once again, the lack of effective transportation for up to 100,000 residents of the area, raised its head. From 1998 on, in every exercise, presentation and meeting where evacuation was discussed, this issue became prominent.

At the Hurricane Pam exercise first sessions in 2004, all participants recognized the evacuation problem, and specifically the lack of effective transportation for a large segment of the population, as crucial to the planning for Metropolitan New Orleans in a major hurricane. Ron Castleman, FEMA Region VI Director in 2004, identified the Pam exercise as the major planning tool available to create a bridge between local, state and federal evacuation and recovery plans. And although during those initial sessions of the exercise evacuation was not directly addressed, it was foremost in the minds of all involved. Pam allowed local and state officials to identify the resources necessary to achieve the survival of the metro area residents, and the fact that they were not available in the state and local arsenal. In fact, during the conference calls that took place between local, state and federal officials before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, reference was made to the Pam decisions and recommendations regarding pre-

positioning of transportation resources for evacuation of the citizens without adequate personal transportation abilities.

We now all know the result of the failure to provide those resources. And, while I understand the necessity of investigation and analysis of what occurred and who was responsible for it, I respectfully request that the committee consider using this catastrophic event as a method to identify what can be done to evacuate and shelter the citizens of any major metropolitan area in the nation if a major disaster occurs.

In closing, I want to sincerely thank the committee for the opportunity to share with it my understanding of these events. I can assure the committee that the elected and appointed officials of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana stand ready to join with them and the President of the United States in assuring that such a catastrophe never happens again.

Thank You.

