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# **SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING TO EXAMINE FEMA OPERATIONS FOLLOWING KATRINA**

WASHINGTON, DC—The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, led by Chairman Senator Susan Collins and Ranking Member Joseph Lieberman, today held its eighth hearing as part of its investigation into the government’s preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. The hearing was titled. “Hurricane Katrina: Perspectives of FEMA’s Operations Professionals.”

Witnesses included individuals who are current and former FEMA officials who represent some of the Agency's most experienced emergency managers and operations professionals. Testifying before the Committee today were Scott Wells, Federal Coordinating Officer, FEMA Joint Field Office, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Philip E. Parr, Deputy Federal Coordinating Officer FEMA Joint Field Office, Austin, Texas; and William L. Carwile, Former Federal Coordinating Officer FEMA Joint Field Office, Biloxi, Mississippi.

"Our national emergency response has been described as a 'bottom-up' system, with local and state authorities leading the way, and federal authorities coordinating operations and the deployment of resources. In Katrina, the system broke down, and the result was the very deprivation and suffering this structure was designed to avoid. The system must be fixed from the bottom to the very top," said Senator Collins. She explained that one of the most glaring breakdowns was in communications.

Senator Lieberman said, "The whole world watched disaster develop in the Gulf of Mexico and move toward the Gulf Coast and listened as forecasters said this was the long-dreaded 'big one' that could take out the levees and flood the Big Easy. Yet FEMA somehow miscalculated the gravity of the storm coming and failed to realize that doing business as usual would compound the disaster... This was not a failure of imagination, as some in our Federal response apparatus want to label it. It was a failure of realization – realization that the catastrophe, about which they had been long warned, was about to occur and that they needed to move quickly to address it. Under these kinds of catastrophic conditions, FEMA should not have seen its role as a butler waiting in the wings to assist when called. Rather, it needed to be a battler, anticipating the problems and making the bureaucracy move quickly for the safety and security of the people of the Gulf Coast."

Today's witnesses are current or former Federal Coordinating Officers (FCOs) and play a critical role in FEMA. In June of 2004, a group of these FCOs, including witness William Carwile urged Undersecretary Michael Brown to undertake reforms to remove obstacles to command, control, and core mission accomplishment, and to revamp the National Emergency Response Plan. According to today's testimony, little was done in response to these recommendations.

Witnesses also testified that it is the responsibility of all levels of government, led by local authorities, to respond to a crisis or natural disaster.

