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# FOOD AND SHELTER NEEDS UNLIKELY TO BE MET DURING A CATASTROPHE

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., Thursday released a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08823.pdf>) that found that FEMA is still not fully prepared for a catastrophic disaster because it does not know completely what resources are available to it from voluntary organizations and has taken no action to fill in potential gaps.

The GAO report, requested by Senators Lieberman and Collins, found that in “worst-case large scale disasters, the projected needs for mass care services would far exceed the capabilities of these voluntary organizations.” For example, a major earthquake in a metropolitan area could necessitate shelter for as many as 300,000 people, according to DHS, but Red Cross officials in Los Angeles—a city prone to earthquakes—could only shelter 84,000 people under optimal conditions. GAO also found that FEMA had not fully assessed the vast resources that voluntary organizations can bring to the scene of a catastrophic disaster.

“Hurricane Katrina and, most recently, Hurricanes Gustav and Ike have demonstrated that the Red Cross and other volunteer humanitarian agencies play a critical role in the preparation for, response to, and recovery from a catastrophic disaster. For that reason – and especially since the Red Cross is currently experiencing financial problems – it is incumbent upon FEMA to get a firm grip on the resources available to it from charity organizations and take the necessary steps to fill any preparedness gaps,” said Lieberman. “Although, FEMA and the rest of the federal government have made significant progress in

becoming prepared to handle a catastrophe, the GAO report reminds us of what we already know: the nation is not fully prepared for an event the size of Katrina. As chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I will continue to conduct aggressive oversight so that FEMA becomes as effective an agency as it needs to be.”

“As the Homeland Security Committee found in its investigation of the flawed response to Hurricane Katrina, and as this GAO report confirms, non-profit and volunteer organizations play a critical role in disaster response. All levels of government should make a greater effort to include them in planning for catastrophic disasters,” said Collins. “Unless FEMA fully understands the capabilities of our non-profit and volunteer organizations – utilizing them when possible and bolstering them when needed – our nation’s disaster response efforts will not be completely effective.”

Under the Department of Homeland Security’s National Response Framework – which outlines agency responsibilities in a disaster – The Red Cross and other voluntary organizations are responsible for a significant portion of mass care – the sheltering and feeding of disaster victims.

GAO recommended updating the Catastrophic Incident Supplement to include recent changes to the role of the Red Cross during disasters, better coordination with voluntary organizations, incorporation of voluntary organizations resources in FEMA catastrophic planning, and updating the Homeland Security State Grant funding guidance to clarify that voluntary organizations are eligible to be sub-grantees.

The report examined the response capabilities of five major charities: The Red Cross, Salvation Army, Southern Baptist Convention, Catholic Charities, and the United Way of America. GAO met with organization representatives in four high-risk metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Washington D.C to examine their readiness for a catastrophic event.