

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2007

# SENATORS SEEK KATRINA ANNIVERSARY ANALYSIS OF RECOVERY

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery Chairman Mary Landrieu, D-La., marked the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina’s landfall Wednesday by requesting a thorough analysis of what the federal government has done, is doing, and still can do to help hurricane victims rebuild their lives.

The two Senators are requesting the Government Accountability Office specifically examine how the government can further help those still receiving federal disaster aid, as the Katrina and Rita Hurricane recovery “sputters along.”

“In light of the continued suffering of many disaster aid recipients, we ask that the Government Accountability Office study the many questions regarding the role of the government in assisting storm victims recover and rebuild their lives in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita,” the Senators wrote in a letter to GAO Comptroller David Walker. “In addressing these broad concerns, some of the specific things we would like GAO staff to consider include what the federal government has done, is doing, and can potentially do to effectively leverage governmental and non-governmental resources to assist disaster aid recipients...”

Specific areas for GAO examination include government assistance to households to transition to permanent residences and how the availability of affordable rental housing affects this transition; transportation alternatives to

and from isolated group trailer sites to facilitate disaster aid recipients' recovery; crisis counseling and medical assistance; and recommendations for future assistance to disaster victims.

Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, and became the most damaging natural disaster in recent history, killing 1,500 people, laying waste to 90,000 square miles of land, obliterating coastal communities, and leaving thousands of people destitute.

The Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee immediately launched an investigation into the inadequate response at all levels of government and subsequently passed legislation through the Congress to reinvent FEMA into an agency capable of preparing for and responding to catastrophes.

Two years later, while much has been done and billions of dollars spent to help the area recover, tens of thousands still remain unemployed and stranded in FEMA trailer parks, some located apart from commercial areas and employment.

Below is a copy of the GAO letter:

August 29, 2007

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Today marks the two year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina striking the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophe by all accounts – causing extraordinary, devastating damage in terms of lives lost, property damaged, and disruption to our economy. Its destruction created major recovery and rebuilding challenges. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, another devastating storm, Hurricane Rita, hit the Gulf Coast and also caused immense damage. These storms turned the lives of many victims upside down – in some cases robbing victims of family members and friends, homes, jobs, and communities and neighborhoods – in essence stripping them of almost all aspects of life as they knew it. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita also showed us the harsh realities of

poverty – some have referred to this as the difference between the “haves and the have not”. Those suffering from limited financial means prior to the hurricanes in many circumstances are continuing to suffer disproportionately.

Although much has been done to recover from the storms, the job seems to be sputtering along with far more work ahead. As the recovery moves along, many of the people affected by the storms continue to suffer. For example, a recent study conducted by the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps highlights the issues facing those living in FEMA trailer parks, painting a heart wrenching picture. Of those surveyed, trailer park occupants were predominately poor, nearly half were either unable or unwilling to speculate as to how much longer they would stay in the FEMA trailer park, most were unemployed, many had serious health issues, including depression, many had been victims of theft and domestic abuse and believed the park was not safe, and only a few had received education or job training while living in the FEMA park. Another recent study by the Louisiana Recovery Authority suggests that the number of people who have moved after the storm is higher than previously thought, showing a massive disruption of the population.

In light of the continued suffering of many disaster aid recipients, we ask that the Government Accountability Office study the many questions regarding the role of the government in assisting storm victims recover and rebuild their lives in the wake of Hurricanes

Katrina and Rita. In this request, we would like GAO to look at people receiving federal disaster aid as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, particularly those people who still live in travel

trailers at group sites. We are interested in discovering what roadblocks are preventing these disaster aid recipients from a faster recovery, efforts of the federal government to assist these disaster victims in getting back on their feet and the federal government’s plan for assisting in doing so, and the costs of housing disaster victims in FEMA’s group trailer sites. In addressing these broad concerns, some of the specific things we would like GAO staff to consider include what the federal government has done, is doing, and can potentially do to effectively leverage governmental and non-governmental resources to assist disaster aid recipients in rebuilding their lives, including:

assisting households in transitioning into permanent residences and how the availability of affordable rental housing affects this transition;  
dealing with the different challenges faced by renters and homeowners and whether renters and homeowners are getting similar and equitable government assistance in rebuilding their lives;

improving transportation alternatives to and from the group trailer sites to facilitate the recovery of disaster aid recipients;  
providing tools to disaster aid recipients to assist them in obtaining employment;  
assisting disaster aid recipients through case management;  
assisting disaster aid recipients through crisis counseling;  
assisting children of disaster victims;  
assisting disaster victims in accessing adequate medical services; and  
working with state and local governments and other nongovernmental organizations to support their efforts in helping the disaster aid recipients recover.

In addition, we ask that GAO consider and provide recommendations on what actions the federal government should take in the immediate or near future to assist these disaster aid recipients in getting back on their feet. We also ask that GAO provide recommendations on what actions the federal government, in partnership with state and local governments, nonprofit entities, and the private sector, should take to better assist disaster aid recipients of future disasters, especially of catastrophic disasters, in rebuilding their lives, including the best organizational structure for future disaster assistance, and whether group trailer sites should be used in future disasters. Finally, we ask that you provide us with information regarding any issues GAO has in obtaining information for this review, both by timely informing our staff and by discussing any such issues in any report produced.

Given the extraordinary suffering of the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we would appreciate your expedition of this request as much as possible. Thank you in advance for your assistance. If you have any questions or concerns, or want to discuss plans for completing this study, please contact Mary Beth Schultz, 202-224-2627, on Senator Lieberman's staff, or Donny Williams, 202-224-4462, on Senator Landrieu's staff.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman  
Chairman  
Homeland Security and  
Governmental Affairs

Mary Landrieu  
Chairman  
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

