

February 27, 2006

The Honorable Michael B. Enzi, Chairman
The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy, Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Enzi and Senator Kennedy:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet with you in March as a participant in your roundtable discussions focusing on the community based organizations' response to relief and reconstruction efforts in the Gulf Coast due to this past year's hurricanes. I am looking forward to sharing lessons learned as well as gaining valuable information from my colleagues and your committee as together we plan and prepare for the 2006 hurricane season. I want to take this opportunity to also provide you with my personal statement.

As Chief Executive Officer of the Southeast Louisiana Chapter of the American Red Cross for the past six years, and as its Emergency Services Director for three years prior to that, I have had the unique opportunity of being able to work with local, state and national partners during the past nine years to develop and help implement preparedness measures in our chapter that helped lay the groundwork for the operations we began, and continue to support today, the American Red Cross' response to Hurricane Katrina.

About the American Red Cross

For more than 124 years, the mission of the American Red Cross has been to help Americans prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies. In 1905, Congress chartered the American Red Cross to provide a system of disaster response and to mitigate suffering caused by disaster. We continue to meet this mandate today. We have a long and proven track record of immediate response to major disasters, both natural and man made. In towns and cities across the United States, the more than 800 chapters of the American Red Cross responded to more than 72,000 disasters in the past year, ranging from residential house fires to the devastating hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast.

Governed by volunteers and supported by community donations, the Red Cross is a network of more than 800 chapters, eight regional service areas, and 35 Blood Services regions dedicated to saving lives. The Red Cross provides a unique community-based network to support all-hazard preparedness in your districts, to your constituents, each and every day. As an integral member of the first response community with expertise in meeting the human needs associated with disasters, we are integrated into state and local government agency disaster planning exercises and response efforts. We partner with local, state, and federal governments to provide emergency shelter, food, and health and mental health services as well as short-term financial assistance to address basic human needs.

While we are a single organization, I will limit my remarks following to my role as chief executive officer of one of these 800 chapters in our network, the Southeast Louisiana Chapter, headquartered in New Orleans, Louisiana.

My experience operating in the Gulf Coast

As the winds of Hurricane Katrina were racing across Florida on Thursday, August 26, our chapter began preparations for the possibility of its landfall near the metropolitan New Orleans area. We staffed emergency operations centers (EOC) in the twelve parishes that comprise our chapter's jurisdiction as they opened and began outlining our response with other community and governmental partners for the 1.2 million residents within this area.

On Friday, August 27, the timbre of our conversations changed as the possibility that New Orleans could receive a direct hit from Hurricane Katrina was mentioned with increasing frequency. Our chapter began its rundown of checklist items—from making sure our disaster volunteers were both ready to help and aware of pre-set staging locations in the event of an evacuation, to making sure our own employees had prepared their homes and families for this threat. As the chief executive officer, I notified our board of directors of current plans. I also called our staff together on that Friday afternoon for what would be our last full staff meeting at our chapter headquarters, located on Canal Street in downtown New Orleans. During this meeting, I answered questions and advised our staff of the current situation with the storm, reminding each of us of our responsibility to open shelters pre-landfall and reviewing our Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). (Our Southeast Louisiana Chapter's COOP was developed to ensure that needed resources for business continuity were evacuated with our chapter when the likelihood of such an evacuation seemed imminent.) Once chapter staff had supplied our management team with weekend contact numbers, they were given the opportunity to leave early to prepared their homes and pack their bags. Each would be notified on Saturday should the hurricane's path and threat dictate an activation of our COOP.

On Saturday, August 28, after consultation with my Emergency Services Director and my Board Chairman, I activated our chapter's COOP. Hurricane Katrina was indeed heading toward our chapter area as a Category 5 storm, with winds of over 150 miles per hour. Because the American Red Cross had long ago determined that no area below Interstate 12 in our chapter was safe from storm surge and flooding due to hurricanes, activating the COOP meant relocating our chapter to an area outside this "risk" zone. Our American Red Cross representatives at the EOCs in the "risk" areas met with their local emergency preparedness officials for the last time that Saturday morning and then traveled to our chapter's staging site 35 miles north of New Orleans in Covington, Louisiana. I attended a press conference that afternoon with New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin and Governor Kathleen Blanco as the recommended evacuation order was given to our citizens of the New Orleans area. At the end of the press conference, I spoke with both Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco and again reviewed our own evacuation plan for the northshore location. At 5:00 that afternoon, I turned off the lights to our building on Canal Street for the last time.

Throughout the days during and following our Saturday evacuation to a safe site north of New Orleans, our chapter staff of 42 was called upon to perform what can only be described as Herculean tasks. We opened 26 shelters to persons seeking safety from the storm—shelters whose populations at times exceeded 5000. Ever mindful that their own homes stood in the path of this deadly storm, my staff continued to man their stations, stretching resources to the max, knowing that each person who sought their hand in comfort was also lost in a shared fear of the unknown. Shelters originally designed to house 200 residents made room for 50-100 more. While many of those who sought shelter with us before the storm hit came with supplies, hundreds more brought to us after the storm, arrived with nothing except that which could be hoisted on a rope into a boat or onto a helicopter from a rooftop. There were many “walking wounded” among our residents—and time and time again, that same Red Cross employee or volunteer who feared he or she had lost their own home in this storm, were the same individuals who offered a hand and a shoulder to someone less fortunate.

For a short period of time, I was out of communication with my staff, only able to hear their stories from others’ accounts. This was perhaps the darkest time for me. Being responsible for the lives of 42 very dedicated persons who put their trust in my guidance—and not being able to reach out to touch them to make sure they were okay—was incredibly difficult. I worked night and day to ensure that resources were sent to each of our staff in the shelters they were operating, —and I depended on the knowledge that our training and preparations which occurred before this storm would get us through the tough times.

I was able to meet with our staff for the first time five days after Katrina. We all gathered under an old oak tree in northern Washington parish, about 70 miles from our chapter headquarters on Canal Street—but light-years away from our last staff meeting that fateful Friday afternoon. As I looked at the faces of the individuals who in my mind are the untold heroes of Katrina—those who held the hands of countless individuals whose own were shaking because of a storm with unheard of viciousness; those who provided comfort, shelter and security in a time when chaos ruled; and those who remained calm despite the uncertainties of their own homes and families—I looked into the very essence of what is good in our country, and I saw the untouchable spirit of the American Red Cross that drives someone to risk all they know and love to help their fellow man. I looked into a group of people who, for a brief moment in time, were able to give hope through the offer of hot food, shelter, an encouraging hand and an open heart.

As I told our staff what I knew at that moment—of their homes flooded, of neighborhoods and communities they loved lost, of an era of innocence and safety we all knew vanquished—I also told them of my awe and respect for what each of them were able to accomplish in the face of unspeakable odds. I asked each of them to remember what happened here, and to never forget what we were able to overcome, as part of the American Red Cross...

And then I told them help was on the way.

Getting to that place was not accomplished alone—there were many partners, both governmental and community based organizations who helped contribute to our success that day. And, as we mark the sixth month anniversary of a disaster called Katrina which has forever changed the path of our city, there are many other partners who continue to support our recovery and without whom we would be unable to take the significant steps toward becoming whole again.

Allow me to highlight a few:

In late January 2004, our chapter convened a group of individuals who shared one common theme—an expressed need to find evacuation options for people with no transportation resources when an evacuation order was given due to an approaching hurricane. From an original group of about 40 to a nucleus of 10, we met weekly during this time until September 2004 to develop a grassroots plan that helped address that need. Named “Operation Brother’s Keeper” (OBK), the plan was simple. With the help of the faith communities, identify persons within the inner city faith congregations who had no transportation options during an evacuation; partner those same persons with congregation members who had space to offer for transportation out of the city; match this at-risk inner city congregation with a partner host congregation outside the risk area; train that host congregation to become a shelter for those in need; and, support that shelter as an American Red Cross shelter. A local foundation funded a grant for OBK and we officially began meeting with a defined set of expectations and outcomes in March 2005. While it is not the role of the American Red Cross to evacuate areas at risk, we had much to contribute.

We were five months into the grant cycle and on target with defined expectations when Hurricane Katrina hit. While no concrete plans had been developed with individual congregations, we had been able to train community educators who would also help with congregational surveys and hurricane preparedness seminars. In addition, we had identified our first match of risk congregation and host congregation and were in the process of setting up shelter management training.

In February 2005, our chapter met with the Louisiana State Police and the Louisiana Department of Homeland Security and Office of Emergency Preparedness to begin drafting a single map which could be used by all segments of the community and media for evacuation planning. Subsequent meetings involved our state’s government relations chapter lead, the Louisiana Capital Area Chapter, and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LA DOTD). The result of this process was an all-hazards brochure that contained an evacuation map detailing the phased evacuation process for Louisiana’s coastal areas, including the contraflow system, which had been redesigned by LA DOTD and the State Police. The American Red Cross was able to contribute valuable preparedness information and provide a portion of the funding. An additional grant from the Department of Homeland Security and the LA DOTD allowed the printing of 1.5 million copies. During the months of July and August, prior to

Hurricane Katrina, we were able to distribute nearly 1 million of these to residents of Southeast Louisiana.

Many of these copies were distributed by our faith community to congregation members through Operation Brother's Keeper. In addition, educational presentations were held in many venues to help our citizens understand the need to evacuate during a hurricane event and the critical need of preparedness.

Being ready for any category hurricane or tropical storm is not something our chapter takes lightly. This past hurricane season was no exception. In the spring of 2005, we participated in the state's Hurricane Pam exercise and used this participation as an opportunity to test our own volunteer and staff's disaster readiness level. In June, we conducted our own disaster exercise, "Hurricane Mike", a twelve parish simulated evacuation and disaster shelter response. Tropical Storm Cindy, which affected our area also in June, again tested our disaster volunteers and staff's ability to respond quickly as we set up shelters in the affected portion of our chapter jurisdiction. Hurricane Dennis had our chapter once again packing our own evacuation boxes and preparing to evacuate from our downtown New Orleans location to a site 35 mile north of the city. By the time the evacuation order had been given for Hurricane Katrina, our chapter had experienced four evacuations since June. We felt prepared to meet the challenge.

In hindsight, we did so exceedingly well.

Coordinated activities with other community-based organizations

Disaster preparedness and response is not the sole responsibility of any one organization. It is the collective responsibility of the entire community and of each and every citizen. Hurricane Katrina brought that note home many times. In the months prior to Hurricane Katrina hitting our city, our chapter had met with many of our community partners to ensure a coordinated response during disasters. Collaborating with other organizations on response efforts is nothing new to our chapter. Before Hurricane Katrina changed the New Orleans area population, the Southeast Louisiana Chapter was the fourth busiest Red Cross disaster response chapter in the country—responding to a fire or other natural disaster every eight hours. While our chapter was the only organization in the city to respond directly, we collaborated with other organizations active in disasters to help provide additional resources to those whose homes had been affected or destroyed. We had working memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with many of our social service providers to help provide additional resources of food, clothing, household furnishing and emotional support to those in need. With many of these community-based organizations, we were able to leverage our assessment of damage to help increase the services provided to one of our clients.

In the days prior to Katrina hitting our area, our chapter met with the local agency that administers 2-1-1 to review our chapter's disaster evacuation plans. We provided this agency with preparedness information so that those who called this help line would understand how to access evacuation information. In addition, we met with our local food bank, Second Harvesters, to review our current MOU and identify additional ways

we could work jointly in the event of a large scale disaster. We spoke to other community partners—United Ways (of which five are located in our chapter area), Catholic Charities, Salvation Army, the Southern Baptists and, of important note, to our governmental leaders and partners—including the Mayor of New Orleans and Parish Presidents of many of the other eleven parishes our chapter is responsible for. In each of the conversations, we reiterated our own evacuation plan for our chapter and our commitment to the people of the communities we serve. In the days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina and subsequently Hurricane Rita, these conversations helped lay the basic foundations of our disaster response. We are still working with all of our community partners today as we continue to feed more than 7,000 hot meals each day in the Southeast Louisiana Chapter area and provide bulk distribution of clean-up and basic household items. We have been the recipient of many volunteers and donated goods from these organizations—all of us united by one common goal...to help our community recover.

Preparing for the 2006 hurricane season

Each week, our chapter plays host to a group of non-profit agency executive directors who meet to help define community needs and build collaboratives to address those needs. Each week, we take steps to prepare our agencies, our employees and constituencies, and our communities for this year's hurricane season.

This is a unique season—for many reasons.

Many of those who have moved back into our area now live in a trailer and have given very little thought of evacuation planning. Our chapter is seeking to address that now by going into areas with a large number of trailers (either in villages or on the front lawns) and distributing informational brochures on hurricane safety. By creating “safe neighbor networks”, we hope to define steps families can take to be prepared for this hurricane season.

With the condition of our levee system still very much in question, and the coastal erosion that occurred as a result of this past season's hurricanes, it is critical that the residents in these vulnerable areas develop an evacuation plan and be ready to put that plan into action at an earlier stage than ever before. Tropical storms that used to send us into our homes for safe shelter will now send us seeking safety out of the area—from a physical well-being standpoint as well as an emotional stability standpoint.

Our citizens' sense of security has been shaken to its core by Mother Nature. When evidence of her ability to turn our world upside down once again is presented, nerves will be on edge. We continue to work with our mental health professional to find ways to help our communities cope with the emotional traumas this year's season may bring, engendering yet another opportunity for us to partner with newer community based organizations, such as Louisiana's Spirit.

It is critical to continue work in the community around Operation Brothers Keeper. We know this is a grassroots effort for evacuation planning that can work—and did to some

extent during Hurricane Katrina. We have begun meeting with our OBK table of original partners and are inviting others to join us as we define the obstacles to evacuation planning for those with no transportation resources, utilizing community based solutions. The faith community performed exceptionally in response to Hurricane Katrina, and we are honored to partner with these individuals and congregations to attack a problem that has no easy answer. Bi-weekly meetings with this group continue.

As we move into the hurricane season this year, our chapter continues to work with our national organization to identify lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and implement changes that will improve our overall preparedness. These lessons are the ones taken from the stories of the families who lived through the nightmare of Katrina and from those who did not.

Our responsibility to the American people is to make sure they are heard...and heeded.

Again, thank you for your invitation. I look forward to meeting with you on March 7th.

Sincerely,

Kay W. Wilkins
Chief Executive Officer
Southeast Louisiana Chapter
American Red Cross