



Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General

Management Advisory Report: FEMA's Response to Hurricane Ike






Homeland
Security

June 11, 2009

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable W. Craig Fugate
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency

FROM: 
Richard L. Skinner
Inspector General

SUBJECT: Management Advisory Report: *FEMA's Response to Hurricane Ike*
(OIG-09-78)

This memorandum presents the results of our review of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's response to Hurricane Ike. After landfall, we deployed a team to review FEMA's disaster response activities. Our objective was to identify opportunities for FEMA to improve delivery of its disaster programs. At the same time, we attended public assistance applicant briefings and kickoff meetings to assist FEMA in answering applicant questions about contracting and documentation requirements for FEMA grants.

We interviewed FEMA and Texas Governor's Division of Emergency Management (GDEM) officials, attended command and general staff meetings, visited Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) and FEMA base camps, reviewed FEMA's progress in implementing its direct housing program, and examined pertinent documentation such as emails, task orders, contracts, and invoices. We conducted our review from September 13 to December 10, 2008, under the authority of the *Inspector General Act of 1978*, as amended, and according to *Quality Standards for Inspections* issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

Background

Hurricane Ike made landfall near Houston, Texas, on September 13, 2008, as a strong Category 2 hurricane. Six months after landfall, GDEM and FEMA reported providing \$519 million in disaster assistance for housing and other disaster-related needs, and obligating another \$602 million in public assistance funding. In addition, the U.S. Small Business Administration approved \$584 million in low-interest disaster loans.

Disaster response is complex, and inaction can lead to lives lost and property destroyed. Response activities require close coordination and cooperation among all levels of government, non-profit organizations, the private sector, and individuals. The National Response Framework (NRF), the Nation's disaster response playbook, provides guidelines for first responders at all levels.

The NRF defines key principles, roles, and structures of participants who respond to incidents to ensure a coordinated, effective national response. The NRF requires:

- (1) Engaged partnerships – leaders at all levels must communicate and actively support engaged partnerships;
- (2) Tiered response – incidents must be managed at the lowest possible level and, when needed, supported by higher levels of government;
- (3) Adaptability – emergency managers must adapt their response to changes in size and scope;
- (4) Unified command – emergency managers must have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities; and
- (5) Readiness to act – all involved must be ready to save lives and protect property.

Local, state, and federal emergency management professionals coordinate the disaster response. The NRF also recognizes that elected and appointed officials at all levels have significant roles and responsibilities in disaster response. For example, senior local elected or appointed officials, such as the mayor, city manager, county manager, sheriffs, county judges, governors, members of Congress and state legislatures, and federal and state appointed officials, all must work together to meet the needs of disaster victims in a coordinated, effective manner.

Results of Review

FEMA's response following Hurricane Ike was well organized and responsive to the needs of disaster victims. However, in some instances decisions were made outside of the NRF command and control structure. As a result, water and ice purchases far exceeded local requirements, base camp capacity exceeded demand, and DRCs remained open longer than warranted. FEMA could have reduced response costs by as much as \$18 million by consistently applying NRF principles. FEMA needs to reinforce NRF principles and clarify the authority of local and regional emergency managers to make operational decisions.

FEMA's Disaster Response

FEMA and its partners were prepared for this disaster. We reviewed FEMA's response activities from landfall until early December 2008. FEMA's response to Hurricane Ike was well organized and effective, and FEMA and its federal and state partners implemented their incident objectives aggressively. By the end of October 2008, only 7 weeks after landfall, FEMA had registered more than 715,000 hurricane victims, completed 359,000 housing inspections, installed manufactured housing for 339 families, and disbursed \$326 million for housing and other needs. FEMA also assisted more than 100,000 disaster victims at its DRCs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleared 16.6 million cubic yards of debris and temporarily repaired 27,000 roofs. In addition, the U.S. Small Business Administration made \$166 million in low interest loans.

By early December 2008, 3 months after landfall, FEMA had placed nearly 1,900 families in manufactured housing, opened 128 DRCs serving 128,000 victims, and provided transitional sheltering in hotels and motels for 26,500 families. FEMA also conducted 31,000 housing pre-placement interviews with disaster victims seeking housing assistance.

National Response Framework Principles

FEMA made some response decisions without adhering to NRF principles. Most significantly, FEMA did not consistently follow the tiered response principle that requires emergency managers to handle disasters at the lowest jurisdictional level possible. In addition, FEMA did not communicate to the state its decision to send water and ice to the disaster or properly direct the well-intended efforts of elected officials to influence operational decisions. FEMA headquarters officials also deployed other resources outside the Joint Field Office (JFO) unified command structure.

To improve response in future disasters, FEMA should reinforce the key principles of the NRF and strengthen the authority of regional and JFO emergency managers to manage disasters at the lowest possible level within the unified command structure. Specifically, in major disasters like Hurricane Ike, the presidentially appointed Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) and the State Coordinating Officer (SCO) appointed by the governor, working as a team with their staff and disaster response partners, should make operational response decisions under the unified command structure. Instances of where FEMA did not adhere to the NRF principles are addressed below.

Water and Ice

FEMA headquarters officials ordered 1,442 truckloads of water and 1,147 truckloads of ice through mission assignments to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In April 2008, FEMA announced that it would no longer provide ice for disasters because it is not a lifesaving commodity, and prior to landfall, FEMA Region VI emergency managers reinforced this policy by informing GDEM that the state would be responsible for providing its own ice. However, FEMA reversed its position and sent water and ice in response to Hurricane Ike although:

- GDEM officials did not request water or ice assistance from FEMA;
- GDEM officials had already purchased and deployed water and ice; and
- GDEM officials did not identify a water or ice shortfall in the state's Gap Analysis Program (GAP).

Additionally, information regarding the shipments of water and ice was not relayed to GDEM. The engaged partnerships principle requires ongoing communication of disaster response activity among all partners and the tiered response principle requires that incidents be managed at the lowest possible level. Therefore, the decision to ship water and ice to the affected areas should have been based on the judgment of FEMA regional, GDEM, and local emergency managers. In addition, FEMA should have told GDEM about its decision to send water and ice.

After GDEM deployed its own ice to the areas impacted by the hurricane, GDEM realized FEMA was also sending ice to the disaster. GDEM then asked FEMA to stop the ice shipments because too much ice was heading into the affected areas. However, it was too late as trucks were already on the

way. GDEM then contacted its suppliers and successfully negotiated a return of more than 400 truckloads of state-purchased ice to be used for non-food purposes. However, FEMA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials were unable to negotiate a cost-effective return of their ice to their vendor.

Unable to find a use for its extra ice, FEMA melted 558 truckloads at Randolph Auxiliary Air Field. The ice cost FEMA about \$16,661 per truckload, for a total of \$9 million. FEMA had no choice but to melt the ice as it was too expensive to store. After electric power was restored to the region, FEMA donated about 450 truckloads of water, valued at about \$4 million, to regional food banks and other non-profit organizations. FEMA based its decision on how much water to donate on available FEMA warehouse space and transportation costs.

FEMA officials should have adhered to the tiered response principle and made their determinations based on the FEMA Region VI and GDEM Gap Analysis Program. FEMA developed the GAP to provide FEMA and its state partners with a snapshot of resource gaps at the local, state, and national levels. This analysis allows FEMA to use its limited resources and staff to fill the resource gaps and ensure the best possible disaster response. FEMA expects states to be as self-sufficient as possible, and in this case, the state had contracts in place for water and ice. However, GDEM's analysis did identify potential shortfalls in blankets, cots, and ambulances.

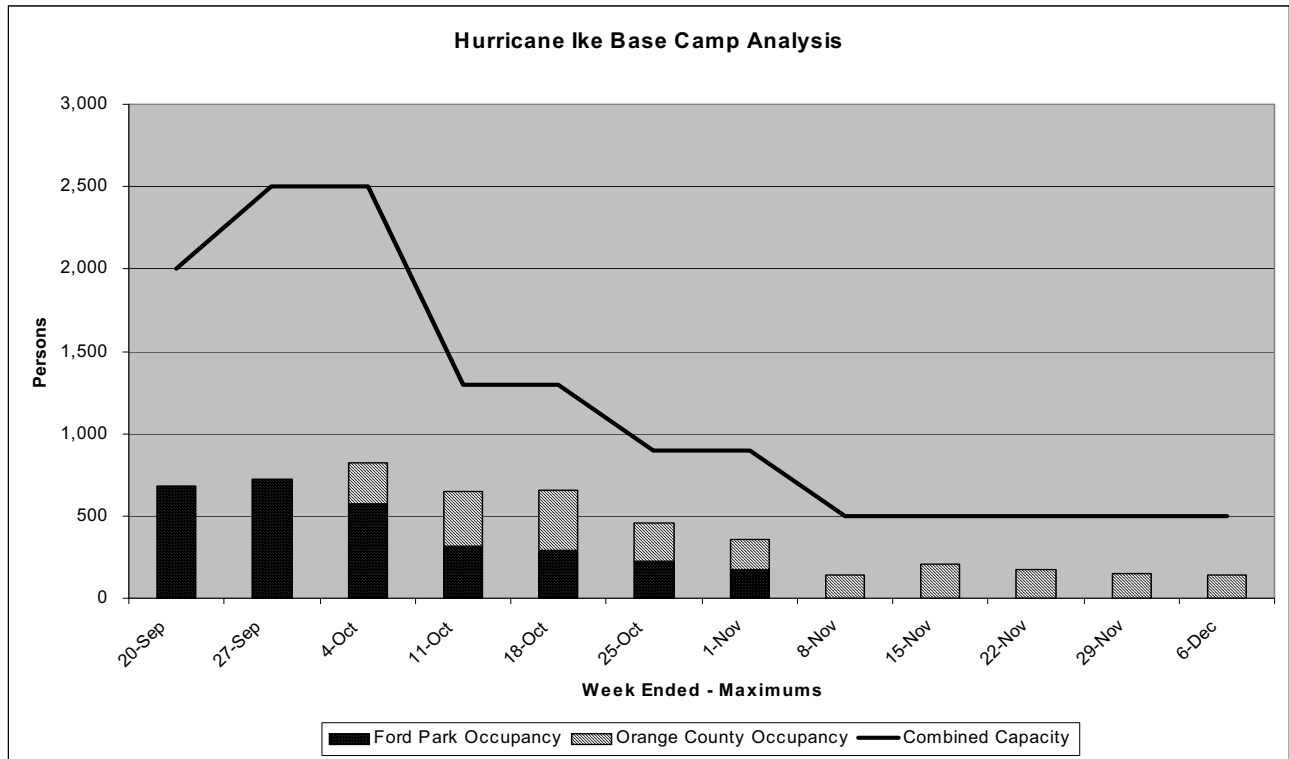
Orange County Base Camp

Five days after landfall, against the advice of FEMA's emergency managers at the Austin, Texas, JFO, an appointed Department of Homeland Security (DHS) headquarters official ordered a 500-person base camp for Orange County, Texas, only 30 miles from the 2,000-person Ford Park base camp. The decision was based on a request from a local elected official to the headquarters official. However, the request was not coordinated through GDEM or the JFO for consideration. FEMA incurred about \$5 million in costs to open and operate the base camp. FEMA reduced Ford Park's capacity by 1,200 beds after the first 2 weeks. See Figure 1 for a comparison of capacity to occupancy for Ford Park and Orange County base camps.

FEMA must pay for base camp capacity regardless of whether it is used. The Ford Park base camp was expensive; however, the high capacity of Ford Park was unavoidable as FEMA's JFO emergency managers based the capacity decision on their experiences following Hurricane Rita in 2005. The NRF tiered response principle states that incidents are best handled at the lowest jurisdictional level possible; therefore, FEMA and state emergency managers in Texas, not DHS officials in headquarters, were in the best position to decide whether another base camp was necessary.

The NRF recognizes that elected and appointed officials have important roles during disasters. However, FEMA needs to strengthen the ability of its JFO and regional emergency managers to channel the well-intended efforts of elected and appointed officials in conformity with NRF principles. To ensure efficient operations, the FCO and SCO should make the operational decisions using the unified command structure, without political interference.

Figure 1. Comparison of Ford Park and Orange County Base Camp Capacity to Occupancy



Disaster Recovery Centers

FEMA emergency managers kept a DRC open longer than necessary in response to political pressure from an elected federal official. Because the number of daily visits by disaster victims had dropped and another large DRC was located only 9 miles away, the JFO unified command announced its plan to close the DRC. However, after receiving a complaint from a member of Congress, FEMA headquarters directed local FEMA managers to keep the site open. FEMA paid about \$30,000 in additional rent. Later, again based on political pressure, FEMA allowed two elected officials to decide the locations of mobile DRCs. Operational decisions for DRCs, such as where to place them and how long to keep them open, should be based on both the number of victims served and the cost of keeping the centers open. The unified command team and JFO staff, not elected and appointed officials, should make operational decisions.

The NRF recognizes that elected federal officials have an important, ongoing role in supporting their constituents for effective local response and emergency planning. Elected officials can help local leaders understand the federal resources that are available to prepare for disasters. Especially during high-consequence events, many citizens traditionally contact their representatives for assistance or information on federal response policies and programs. DHS and FEMA officials also have an obligation to provide elected officials with timely information about disasters. Specifically, it is the responsibility of the Congressional Affairs component of Emergency Support Function 15. Staffs assigned to this component are responsible for coordinating the exchange of information between DHS, FEMA, and Congress. These activities include educating, building relationships, directing

energies, and managing expectations throughout the response phase of the disaster. Effective disaster management also includes continuous, long-term, high-level planning by elected or senior officials.

Other Resources

FEMA headquarters staff deployed FEMA personnel and resources to the disaster-impacted area without coordinating these actions with FEMA Region VI and unified command JFO emergency managers. This led to confusion and some staffing shortfalls during the disaster response. Specifically, FEMA headquarters staff deployed additional Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT) to the area and established a Public Affairs Joint Information Center in Houston. The NRF unified command principle requires close coordination of response efforts.

FEMA deploys IMATs to disaster areas to support county and state emergency operations staff. The IMAT coordinates federal activities and relays on-the-ground information back to the state and FEMA. However, FEMA headquarters deployed additional IMATs that the FCO did not need or request because FEMA already had sufficient IMAT resources deployed to the disaster. As a result, the IMAT personnel arrived without a mission or disaster response requirement, thereby creating confusion and lack of clarity in the disaster response.

FEMA headquarters also established and operated a Joint Information Center in Houston, independent of the JFO unified command and External Affairs operation in Austin. The Houston Joint Information Center influenced the opening of some DRCs and commodity distribution locations based on political and media pressure rather than operational need, which resulted in some understaffing and resource shortfalls. By independently operating this Joint Information Center, FEMA headquarters also did not support FEMA Region VI and the GDEM's strategic planning, public messaging, and external affairs outreach activities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

FEMA's response to Hurricane Ike was well organized and responsive to the needs of victims. However, FEMA could have reduced costs by consistently applying NRF principles and redirecting political influence on operational decisions. FEMA officials must respond quickly to disasters, but in doing so should not abandon the principles of the NRF. Operational decisions should originate with, and be decided by, the local, state, and federal emergency managers on the ground, not by elected and appointed officials outside the unified command. To improve response in future disasters, FEMA should reinforce the key principles of the NRF.

We recommend that the Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency:

Recommendation #1: Reinforce the key principles of the National Response Framework and strengthen the authority of regional and Joint Field Office emergency managers to manage disasters at the lowest possible level.

Please advise us within 30 days of this memorandum of actions taken to implement our recommendation. Should you have any questions, please call me, or your staff may contact Matt Jadacki, Deputy Inspector General for Emergency Management Oversight, at (202) 254-4100.

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