Homeland Security/Natural Disasters

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Thesis

The National Response for natural disasters should be updated and communicated to all agencies and the American people because the coordination efforts between federal, state, and local agencies are ineffective and this greatly affects the National Security Strategy for Homeland Security.

I. Natural Disasters

II. Hurricane Katrina

III. National Response Plan
Abstract

The National Response for natural disasters should be updated and communicated to all agencies and the American people because the coordination efforts between federal, state, and local agencies are ineffective and this greatly affects the National Security Strategy for Homeland Security. Natural disasters have cost the United States billions of dollars and too many lives, but no natural disaster affected the American people like Hurricane Katrina. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the agency in charge of handling natural disasters, but they are plagued with numerous problems and this greatly affects our Nation.
Homeland Security/Natural Disasters

The National Response for natural disasters should be updated and communicated to all agencies and the American people because the coordination efforts between federal, state, and local agencies are ineffective and this greatly affects the National Security Strategy for Homeland Security.

The United States has paid a costly price in the past decade for natural disasters. The stunning costs to the economy as well as widespread loss of life and property have been staggering. The Midwest floods in 1993 had a price tag of $2 billion. Hurricane Andrew produced another $30 billion in damages, the Northridge earthquake $15 billion, and damages in the 1991 Oakland wildfires climbed to $3 billion. (Anderson, J. 2005. National Response Framework). A natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina and the tremendous responsibilities placed on the federal, state and local agencies crippled our Nation and greatly affected Homeland Security. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as the head organization should mitigate losses and coordinate efforts. FEMA actually impeded progress with Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts.

When Hurricane Katrina touched down along the Louisiana-Mississippi border it quickly became overwhelming. The economic impact was shocking. Katrina caused far-reaching devastation down the central Gulf Coast states of the U.S. Gulfport, MS; New Orleans, LA and Mobile, AL absorbed the brunt of Katrina's force and will need years of recovery efforts to be restored back to normal. Other storms have produced greater constant winds when they touched land. The deadliest hurricane in the U.S. was in Galveston, Texas in the early 1900s claiming over 8000 lives. However, Katrina’s devastation affected the American people and our way of life like on other hurricanes. Many citizens of Louisiana did not respond to the weather
warnings and found themselves in the middle of a total disaster. “In some cases, families were advised of the hurricane but had no where to go, so they stayed in place. Many families in New Orleans have never moved away from the city. The entire family remains in New Orleans, so leaving is easier said than done”, according to Doucette. (Doucette, S. 2007. Personal Interview). Doucette is a resident of New Orleans and members of his family were affected by Hurricane Katrina. The death toll for Hurricane Katrina was 1,464. The economic impacts for Hurricane Katrina damages and recovery efforts are alarming. The economic losses from Hurricane Katrina total more than the Midwest floods, Hurricane Andrew, Northridge earthquake and Oakland wildfires combined. Katrina’s cost is estimated over $100 billion (Miller, M. 2005. Summary of Hurricane Katrina). Tens of thousands of National Guard men and women and active duty service members from across the nation deployed to the Gulf Coast to help with Katrina recovery operations. There were many support and recovery failures with Hurricane Katrina. According to Congresswoman Louise Slaughter, the Homeland Security Director, Michael Cherfott, blamed local government officials for the failures. Slaughter also went on to make other claims of failures. She stated, “The federal government had not been adequately supporting the effected states and local officials in the years leading up to the disaster and did not give them what they needed after Hurricane Katrina. There was a tremendous outpouring of help coming from locations around America and the world during the first days of the crisis, but FEMA and Homeland Security were unable to use it constructively. A thousand firefighters sent from Utah and nearby areas were asked to do community relations work instead of putting out blazes and rescuing children. Aid and rescue technology offered by more than 90 countries was unable to penetrate FEMA’s bureaucracy and remained as unused resource. Wal-Mart sent trailer-trucks of water, but they were turned back by FEMA officials. FEMA said they
did not need the water. FEMA would not allow a nearby Coast Guard ship to distribute fuel to people on land.” (Miller, M. 2005. Summary of Hurricane Katrina). These examples are only a fraction of the many failures.

The many revisions of the National Response Plan are supposed to help direct the nation in coping with hazardous incidents reaction. The plan should provide direction for key roles and duties across America and connect all agencies, organizations and businesses. It is intended to capture lessons learned from previous disasters, systemic challenges and opportunities, and determine the best way to manage incidents. Previous versions of the plan focused largely on federal roles and responsibilities without including the state and local roles. None of the plans have been well communicated to effectuated agencies or the American population. The plan should allow agencies and other organizations to cut through bureaucracy and use a common sense approach. Hurricane Katrina is clearly an example of the plan not working. One of the many challenges in providing effective incident response are the fairly high turnover and short terms among elected and appointed officials responsible for incident response at all levels or those who are removed from their position. The Director of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, appointed January 2003 was replaced by Michael Chertoff in February 2005. FEMA has had three Directors since February 2001. Successful incident response hinges upon having leaders and first responders well trained and both have invested in response preparedness, developed engaged partnership and are able to achieve shared objectives. The key to success is a concise common plan. This National Response plan is intended to provide that plan. It is important that each level of government adapt and apply the general roles outlined in the plan. When an appointed or elected official serving a limited term or an individual is removed from his position, the lack of continuity or longevity in these vital positions negatively impact any attempts to
adapt and apply the guidance in the National Response Plan. With a high turnover in officials and the many updates of the National Response Plan it is very difficult to know, understand and communicate the plan, not to mention the challenges of establishing partnerships with other agencies. Everyone has a responsibility when a natural disaster occurs. The local senior elected or appointed official is responsible for ensuring the public safety and welfare of citizens. State, territories, and tribal nations have the primary responsibility for the community well-being and welfare of their citizens. If a state anticipates that its resources may become overwhelmed, each Governor can ask for support from the federal government or from other states through mutual aid or emergency monies. The federal government maintains a broad range of capabilities and resources that can be made available upon request of the Governor. It took the federal government five days to respond to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. So, where did the plan breakdown?

This National Response Plan must be communicated to all agencies and the American people. When the Nation’s focus and attention is placed on a natural disasters, homeland security is weakened, especially when valuable resources and time is being wasted. Hurricane Katrina was not the worst natural disaster, but Katrina impacted our nation in a way that other disasters did not. Even though many National Response Plan have been revised and updated in an effort to be better prepared; the plan has been ineffective. Natural disasters will happen, but when we are prepared then we are better and stronger as a nation.
References


Doucette, Shawn, Personal interview, October 28, 2007