

Memorandum

To: Genie Stowers
From: Kathy Yu
Date: 12/11/2008
Re: Hurricane Katrina: A Man-Made Crisis?

Introduction:

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in United States history. It exposed a number of problems that revealed weaknesses of agencies and officials across all levels of the government. The stakeholders included the state governor, the mayor, FEMA, and other city officials that made many incorrect decisions that resulted in all the losses that we have realized today. If appropriate programs and policies had been implemented and executed in New Orleans, it would not have cost so many lives and so much damage.

Issues:

Topography and Man-Made Consequences of Reconstructing the Landscape

New Orleans was founded on a dangerous location that was not suited for living. Even the city's first chief engineer knew that this was an inappropriate site for civilization. Despite the fact, French colonizers continued to invest in this area by constructing levees and used this location for trade purposes. Unfortunately, Americans have done no different in handling the situation in New Orleans. Over the years since the United States bought the Louisiana Territory, engineers simply responded by building the levees stronger and higher every time New Orleans was inundated.

New Orleans was already a bad site for living, but the topography was further exacerbated by human doings. City authorities back in the early 1900s wanted to bring in more capital to New Orleans and turned swamps, wetlands and marshes into usable land. This made New Orleans even more vulnerable during storms because this caused an abundant decrease in soil to absorb water during floods. It was not until 1998 that agencies began to understand the importance of wetlands and marshes as crucial barriers to floods. State and local agencies, including the governor's office, the state's Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the EPA and parishes, published proposal Coast 2050 to try to restore all the natural barriers such as marshlands along the Louisiana coastline. However, it was never implemented due to inadequate funding. Urbanization and industrialization also exacerbated the topography of New Orleans. As the population grew in the 1960s, urbanization posed challenges for the city's drainage system. The inadequacy of the drainage system was especially apparent in the low-lying areas during rainfall and flooding. Meanwhile, Louisiana wanted to attract more manufacturing by enacting favorable tax policies and allowed investments and infrastructure to grow in the New Orleans region, mostly in the low-lying flood-prone areas.

Recurrent floods and disasters had prompted officials to come up with different policies and programs to protect residents in New Orleans. For example, the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) was an insurance program implemented to enforce construction codes and limit housing development in flood zone areas. But city authorities did not comply with the NFIP codes and allowed settlement in these flood-prone areas. This left those who resided in those areas vulnerable to tremendous damage when a hurricane or storm hit.

Due to the rise of suburbanization, those who could move, mostly the Caucasian population, moved to outlying parishes. It was the African Americans and the poor who lacked economic mobility and were left behind in the low-lying and poorly drained areas. This created a racial segregation where blacks resided in the flood prone low-lying areas, while the whites resided in communities on higher ground. Meanwhile, the Federal housing policy contributed to this racial segregation even further. To help subsidize housing for the poor, the Housing Authority of New Orleans launched their housing projects in flood zone prone areas. As a result, it was not surprising those blacks and the poor that were qualified for this subsidized housing remained in low-lying areas and lacked access to cars when Katrina hit.

Lack of Management, Leadership and Coordination in Preparing for Katrina

Poor budgetary management had contributed to the failure of the levee system. The Army Corps of Engineers mentioned that they were instructed by the Congress to build a levee system that could withstand a Category 3 storm and thus it was not strong enough to withstand Katrina, which was a category 4 storm. Congress had focused a majority of its funding on terrorism after the September 11 attacks and as a result, did not appropriate funding for flood protection.

The city failed to implement its evacuation plan due to poor emergency preparation management. Despite the fact that there was a warning 56 hours before Katrina hit, Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin ordered an evacuation only 19 hours before the hurricane hit. The state and local agencies underestimated the scale of Katrina and did not prepare enough resources. There were not enough buses for evacuees and there were critical shortages of food supplies and sanitation. During the time of the storm, 70,000 residents who lacked transportation remained in the city. Even worse, the city had spent \$18 million in federal funding and had gone through two years of emergency training. Yet when Katrina hit, none of the agencies were prepared to respond to the disaster. In fact, fewer than half of Louisiana Guard was on duty the day Katrina hit. Their evacuation plan was simply not in place to prepare for the evacuation process. They were ineffective in evacuating residents and imposing law and order before and during the disaster.

Both the governor and FEMA lacked leadership skills before and during hurricane Katrina. The problem was that no one was in charge in the coordination efforts. For example, Governor Kathleen Blanco, who controlled state agencies and the National Guard, was still scrambling looking for buses even two days after Katrina struck. They failed to round up buses for people who did not own private vehicles. Due to poor communication, FEMA only began to assemble a fleet of buses after they received a request from the state on August 31. When the buses did come, only a fraction of the 500 buses promised by FEMA showed up. FEMA was made a part of the Department of Homeland Security and was mandated so that they provide assistance only when they get a request from state and local agencies. In this case, FEMA which supposedly has the greatest experience in managing disasters did not take a proactive role, yet it ended up waiting for order from the state agency. As mentioned in the case, this failure in relief efforts was due to both state and local agencies' inability to estimate the magnitude and needs of the affected areas and the FEMA's insistence on receiving requests before initiating assistance. Furthermore, it was observed that FEMA had focused most of their attention on terrorist prevention rather than relieving all disasters and hazards.

Recommendations:

There must be a leader who takes control and commands effectively during a crisis. Authorities of federal, state, and local governments must operate with care and responsibility which requires wisdom, knowledge and experience (Wilson, 1886). During a disaster, there should be a knowledgeable and experienced figure, such as the state governor, who should take a leading role and direct and coordinate all the emergency efforts with local and other agencies. This is especially true in our current society where governments have partnered up with so many different agencies and fuzzy boundaries across all

agencies that roles and responsibilities have blurred and it is often difficult to determine who is in charge (Kettle, 2002). As much as we like the decentralization, there must be one person who dictates and takes a leadership role during a crisis. As Wilson (1886) suggests, monarchies have been successful because it is much easier for one person to control a situation than it is to have many people's inputs in any given situation.

Governments need to work hard to build a sense of trust among citizens as we are living in an era of dark times (Stivers, 2008). Woodrow Wilson (1886) mentions that suspicion is harmful in both the private or in the public mind. He believes that trust is the strength in all relations of life and it is the responsibility of the administrators to create this trust. As we learned from Hurricane Katrina, citizens have lost their trust in government agencies for assistance. Wilson (1886) suggests clear cut responsibility of officials is one element that can ensure trustworthiness. Federal, state and local agencies need to form committees to determine and define each agency's role during an emergency. In addition, each agency should assess their current resources, such as labor and supplies, so that when an emergency does occur they would be fully prepared. Once agencies themselves are clear about their own roles, then it is possible to provide this assurance and trust to its citizens. To build more trust among citizens, agencies can involve citizens in more emergency preparation activities. Public agencies can have more open dialogues with citizens by having monthly community meetings to let them know that agencies are there to help and keep citizens informed about their plans and agendas. At the same time officials can use this as an opportunity to get more feedback about citizens' concerns. This involvement with citizens combined with clear roles of agencies can tremendously help build and regain a sense of trust among citizens.

Government officials at all levels should take this incident as well as looking at past storms to better prepare for future catastrophes. For example, the local government should partner up with non-governmental agencies including private and non-profit organizations to provide emergency relief and assistance during disasters (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Agencies should form a committee to implement an evaluation program to assess how each agency such as FEMA and the city mayor's office have performed during disasters in the past and use this information to re-adjust their organization's objectives and programs. We must constantly make adjustments wherever there is a lack of strength in any area or agency (Wilson, 1886). Furthermore, as we saw in the proposal of Coast 2050 and the Army Corps of Engineers, funds were clearly not allocated appropriately. The Congress did not allocate enough funds for flood preparations and focused on terrorist prevention. All the state and local agencies involved in Coast 2050 should create a budget committee to do a careful examination, such as doing forecasts to allocate funds to each phase of the project, to make sure that the program can be carried out in a timely manner. They can also overlook the progress and productivity of Coast 2050 to make necessary adjustments to the budget along the way.

City planners should discourage housing development in these low-lying areas and come up with a plan to place these poor African Americans in higher grounds where it is less prone to flooding. Though it may be cost efficient to build housing projects in these less favorable areas, officials need to understand that the lives of these people costs much more in the long run. In addition to discouraging housing development in these areas, officials should impose laws and policies to stop any agency that attempts to build houses in these areas. Officials must be morally responsible before making future housing development decisions so that the low-income people are not placed in the most vulnerable location of the city. Administrators should have a will of their own to accomplish their work and they should not be a mere passive instrument (Wilson, 1886). When officials and administrators work in a moral valued culture, they will make better decisions for the public (Geuras & Garofalo, 2005). Organizations must encourage administrators to address their concerns and issues and must develop a moral working environment by having training and workshops to emphasize the essence of ethics.

Bibliography

Geuras, D., & Garofalo, C. (2005). Practical Ethics in Public Administration.
Vienna, Virginia: Management Concepts.

Kettl, Donald. (2002). The Transformation of Governance. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University
Press.

Stivers, C. (2008). Governance in Dark Times: Practical Philosophy for Public Service.
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Wilson, W. (1886, November 1). The Study of Administration. Retrieved October 17,
2008 from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=465>