

**The Global Network of Government Innovators
South Asian Regional Forum
Rai Foundation
A-41, M.C.I.E, Mathura Road, New Delhi
September 26-28th, 2007**

“What Are Governments Doing to Create Flexibilities that Make Them Better Able to Deal With Emergencies and Natural Disasters?: Mississippi’s Response to Hurricane Katrina”

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What was the problem?

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina landed at the Mississippi-Louisiana border. With an eye more than thirty miles wide, Katrina devastated the entire coastline. Hurricane forces extended inland more than 200 miles from the coast, resulting in tens of thousands of uninhabitable and often obliterated homes, thousands of small businesses in shambles, dozens of schools and public buildings ruined and unusable, and highways, ports, railroads, water and sewer systems all destroyed. Katrina left more than 45 million cubic yards of debris, more than twice the debris left by 1992’s Hurricane Andrew.

What was the innovation?

Prior to the storm, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) conducted an executive planning session that led to the signing of a State of Emergency order by the Governor. All state agencies and FEMA liaisons were briefed and a unified command was established to oversee the entire process of preparation for and recovery from the storm. MEMA and National Guard liaisons deployed to coastal counties and a MEMA representative traveled to Louisiana to help coordinate evacuations. In the final hours before the storm made landfall, a State Emergency Response Team deployed to Camp Shelby (60 miles north of the Gulf Coast), where National Guard troops were positioned in preparation for food, water and ice distribution missions

Before the storm had fully passed, crews from the Mississippi Department of Transportation began clearing massive debris from roadways. All structurally safe roads were opened to emergency responders within six hours, and the Mississippi National Guard began distributing food, water and ice at points in every county. However, sufficient supply to meet demand was not achieved until September 9, 2005.

What obstacles did you face?

The challenge presented by the storm as an obvious one: the hurricane was 30 miles wide and devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast up to 200 miles inland. The damage generated 45 million square yards of debris and displaced over 100,000 people. One obstacle to providing water and food to displaced people was the challenge of blocked and damaged roads. The National Guard was deployed to assist in opening roads as quickly as possible, in conjunction with the Department of Transportation, but the State of Mississippi was still engaged in rebuilding bridges and restoring transportation over a year after the storm.

During the first part of the disaster, after miscommunication between state and federal emergency management agencies, Mississippi only received between 10 and 20 percent of its requested emergency water and food. Not until 12 days after the storm made landfall did the supply of emergency commodities equal the state's need.

Another major issue was housing supply. An unprecedented number of travel trailers were mobilized to house Mississippi's displaced people, but again there were not enough to meet the need. The state continues to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to supply housing because the trailers themselves remain vulnerable to high winds and to future floods should another major hurricane like Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. An utterly unforeseen challenge has been the skyrocketing cost of housing on the Gulf Coast; these new homes are, in many cases, far too expensive to house the work force rebuilding the region. Insurance claims have also been frustratingly difficult to make. Many state resources have been employed to convince private insurance companies to pay claims that they have rejected due to technicalities in displaced people's home insurance policies.

What were the planned versus actual results?

Following the storm, volunteers at MEMA's Emergency Operations Center staffed a missing persons hotline that took over 11,000 calls from 40 countries in three days and converted the missing persons' addresses into coordinates on GIS maps for both state and national search and rescue teams. The teams performed more than 5,000 rescues in Mississippi. Travel trailers were put in place in record time; at the height of the temporary housing program more than 500 travel trailers were being placed each day. Over 100,000 Mississippians were living in more than 38,000 trailers. These travel trailers and mobile homes continue to be deactivated as people repair and rebuild their homes. The total as of July 11, 2007 is 21,000.

Through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact and the Statewide Mutual Aid Compact, more than 25,000 people from 40 states assisted Mississippi during the response and recovery process. Faith-based organizations played a tremendous role in feeding hurricane victims, especially in the shelters where some evacuees were sheltered until October. The Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Services operated a donations hotline that was staffed by Americorps team members who matched donations coming in with existing needs. The Mississippi Department of Finance and Administration, MEMA and the Commission for Volunteer Services ran a donations warehouse that processed donated goods coming into the state. Almost 10,000 pallets of donated goods were documented.

Hillman Frazier is a State Senator representing District 27 (Hinds County) at the Mississippi State Government, in which capacity he serves as Chairman of the Interstate and Federal Cooperation Committee and Vice Chairman of the Municipalities Committee. Senator Frazier is a democrat with an extensive record of civil rights advocacy: in 1995, he led the Mississippi Legislature in ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which abolished slavery in the U.S. (an amendment the state of Mississippi refused to support when first presented in 1865). Before his election to the State Senate in 1993, he was a member of the Mississippi House of Representatives (1980 to 1993). He has been both an Eisenhower Exchange Fellow and a Fannie Mae Foundation Fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy

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