NACo Policy Agenda
for
Disaster Preparedness, Prevention, Response and Recovery

In light of the widespread devastation in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Texas, the National Association of Counties (NACo) joins our nation’s commitment to rebuilding the Gulf Coast communities affected by recent hurricanes, and preparing the nation for future catastrophic disasters.

The National Association of Counties recognizes that to ensure for the safety of people and the livability of communities, significant resources for disaster planning, mitigation and recovery should be provided. These resources should provide for education and encourage the use of innovative approaches.

Disaster mitigation and recovery resources should be invested to improve the quality of life in the areas of public health and safety, environmental stewardship, and social and economic security. Plans designed to reduce the impact of disasters and to encourage recovery should provide incentives to individuals, the private sector, and government to pursue sustainable development and redevelopment. Individual citizens, the private sector, local, state, and the federal government should act as partners with shared goals and values to further the capacity of our communities to be self-sufficient. Decisions should be driven by a consensus based, inclusive process that stakeholders use and trust. The process should identify local sustainability priorities, leading to the investment of pre and post-disaster resources that will meet the needs of communities.

The National Association of Counties believes that counties are more than just local branches of the state or federal government. The federal government must recognize the partnership aspect of the federal system of government and the inalienable right of state and local purpose governments to participate in the decision making process of that system. It must further recognize that because local governments are closest to citizens they are often best equipped to deliver services and administer programs. Strong county government is an essential component and partner in the effective operation of national-state-local government activities.

Since Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, NACo has continued our efforts to assist counties in these troubling times. In light of the critical role that counties play on the front lines of disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, NACo has created a Policy Agenda for Disaster Preparedness, Prevention, Response and Recovery. These recommendations are outlined on the following pages and contain both short term and long term proposals. Many of them are intended to assist the President and other federal agencies as they continue to make investments and decisions in the wake and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As we offer these suggestions, Counties look forward to a sustained partnership with the federal government and our state and other local partners. This is critical to achieving our common goal of ensuring that all communities are prepared and ready to respond to future natural catastrophes.

Strengthening Critical Infrastructure

Expediting Assistance at all Levels of Government
Federal and state assistance for natural and man made disasters must reach first responders in an expedited fashion. As a result, all levels of government should work together to ensure the timely distribution of assistance to first responders. Reimbursements should at least cover all costs incurred in responding and recovering from major disasters or terrorist attacks. Furthermore, in the event that Federal, State and local government legal, procedural and/or
procurements processes delay the expenditure of funds; efforts must be made to establish an expedited authorization and appropriation process.

**Strengthen Transportation Infrastructure**

Substantial funds will be needed to repair and rebuild highways and bridges, transit systems and airports damaged or destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. Although it may be some time before the full need is determined, Congress must continue to invest in the transportation infrastructure of these embattled communities. The Emergency Relief Highway Program has $100 million for FY05 and another $100 million for FY06 beginning October 1. However, this funding is likely to be totally inadequate to address the ongoing needs throughout the Gulf Coast. Additional funds may also be needed for the Federal Bridge Program because many bridges have been damaged or totally destroyed. Once a determination has been made as to the damage sustained by transit systems in the affected region, the federal government must also appropriate additional funds as no emergency program exists for transit. Furthermore, although the larger commercial airports seem to be up and operating in the region hit by the hurricanes, additional airports will need assistance. As a result, Counties urge the federal government to provide additional assistance to the Airport Improvement Program.

**Strengthen Public Safety Communications Infrastructure:**

With the experience of Katrina, Rita and Wilma and an ongoing understanding of the need for public safety communications, the federal, state and local governments should act in concert to improve the basic infrastructure and provide robust networks across the country. An ideal public safety network would support the development of the next generation architecture that should be a vibrant and flexible system that accommodates different technologies. In particular, the system should incorporate traditional public safety land mobile radio systems into a broader converged architecture that includes satellite, terrestrial and emerging wireless broadband networks. Additional spectrum for new wireless technologies is essential for the roll-out of such networks. A robust communications network should be established to assure adequate communications between federal, state and local responders during such events.

**Strengthen Federal/State/Local Emergency Alert Systems.**

Before and during a natural disaster, communications with citizens is critical. Emergency Alert Systems should be coordinated, and be as location specific as possible to assure citizens are receiving accurate, timely information about the threats presented and possible alternatives for action. The FCC should insist that national and regional radio and television networks are responsive to local governments’ alert needs before and after a disaster.

**Assist Public Safety Communications Interoperability**

The Federal government should assist counties to provide the broadest possible interoperability between public safety agencies across voice, data and geo-data and wireless technologies. The federal government also should assist counties in obtaining additional spectrum as soon as possible to address interoperability. In the event of a disaster or terrorist attack, all first responders should have access to a common set of frequencies that can be used to communicate between agencies. Working with the first responder community, a common standard “language” for interoperability communication needs to be established so that responders from various agencies can act on specific instructions without mistake or delay.

**Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure**

Both Katrina and Rita negatively impacted the Gulf Coast region in the realm of drinking water and sanitation services, around 1,000 systems were affected. Even though most of the systems are “operational,” according to the Environmental Protection Agency – these systems may still need repair and/or reconstruction. Additionally, full restoration will be delayed by the many
breaks in the distribution and collection systems and by the need for upgrade and repairs in older systems. Without clean drinking water and wastewater services, citizens of the Gulf Coast face even more hazards on their road to cleanup. NACo urges Congress to appropriate needed funds to address these shortages.

**Targeted Fiscal Assistance**
NACo believes that it is inappropriate to expect a local government that has experienced significant losses in population, infrastructure, and tax base to rely on municipal debt to finance its own redevelopment. In such an instance, credit support is insufficient and direct fiscal support must be provided. Counties continue to support targeted assistance to needy local governments along with the establishment of a permanent program to provide fiscal assistance to governments with the greatest need. A general targeted assistance program is the most efficient, effective and flexible federal program possible to permit counties that are experiencing fiscal distress to continue to provide essential public services in a manner that is based on locally determined needs. Additionally, NACo opposes any language that forbids the federal government from forgiving loan payments for cash strapped local governments, whose tax base and revenue has been depleted as a result of a catastrophic disaster. As a result, NACo urges Members of Congress to cosponsor and enact S. 1872, sponsored by Senators Mary Landrieu and David Vitter.

**Restore Valuable Coastal Resources and Protect Vital Energy Infrastructure**
Wetlands, once considered worthless wastelands, are now recognized as an essential part of the nation’s resources. As Katrina has demonstrated, without wetlands as a buffer, storms can devastate the nation’s critical energy infrastructure. Coastal Louisiana is home to the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, as well as 6,000 miles of pipelines and numerous refineries. Much of the imported energy resources, approximately 30%, move via pipelines throughout the state’s coastal area. The pipelines were not designed to stand up to hurricane force winds and the incoming salt water. The wetlands which once protected these pipelines have been disappearing at an amazing rate, approximately thirty three football field size areas a day. Additionally, wetlands provide a valuable damper to storm surge, absorbing one foot of storm surge for every three to four miles of wetlands. NACo urges both the federal and state governments to provide incentives, including expanded federal funding for the restoration of wetlands, repair of habitat, and establishment of native vegetation on lands vital to water quality.

**Aid to Citizens**

**Investing in CDBG and HOME for Short-Term and Long-Term Recovery**
The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) are two critical resources for providing housing and services to areas damaged by natural, and other catastrophic disasters. As a result, Counties urge Congress to provide at significant resources for these programs. Both programs have a long history in providing assistance to communities with their housing and community development needs in times of disasters. Communities assisting the citizens displaced by Hurricanes Katrina are using CDBG funds to develop public facilities to provide temporary housing to disaster victims, and rehabilitate units within the community to house evacuees, and provide much needed services, including food, child care, health care, case management and temporary shelter. In addition, CDBG funds can provide rehabilitation assistance to homes and businesses damaged by natural disasters, build new ownership and rental housing, and provide improvements to local infrastructure. The HOME Program can provide tenant-based rental assistance to people displaced by catastrophic disasters, and be used to rehabilitate and construct new housing for low- and moderate-income people.
Enhance Post-Hurricane Public Health Response
Additional federal funding is essential to establishing a robust system to enable counties with evacuees to assess and address the ongoing physical and mental health effects of persons who endured the disaster or who were exposed to toxic contaminants during flooding. Medicaid Assistance as proposed in S. 1716 by Senators Grassley and Baucus should also be enacted.

Additional Funding and Flexibility for Social Services Block Grant Program
The federal government must provide an additional $1.1 billion to the Social Services Block Grant Program (SSBG) and restore it to the 1996 level. SSBG allocates funds to States to support social services programs for adults and children. During times of disaster, SSBG can provide various services to children and the elderly, and be the conduit for other funds as it was after September 11th. Additionally, funds that have been or will be transferred from TANF to SSBG should be available for any hurricane victims. Currently the law restricts the use of the transferred funds and they cannot be used for single adults.

Increase Funding for the National Emergency Grants and Dislocated Workers Program
An additional $500 million should be provided for the Department of Labor’s National Emergency Grant (NEG) program which assists displaced/dislocated workers with temporary jobs for clean-up and restoration purposes as well as training. According to the Labor Department (DOL), 214,000 job losses can be directly attributed to Hurricane Katrina. DOL has already allotted $191 million to the Hurricane Katrina impacted Gulf Coast states, which now exceeds current funding levels available for the NEG program. The federal government should cover current NEG allocations and be prepared for future emergency needs by adding $500 million to the NEG program. Congress should provide additional funding for the Dislocated Workers Assistance Program to train and retrain workers negatively impacted by recent hurricanes and also to meet the needs of other dislocated workers.

Ensure that Adequate Medical Surge Capacity Exists
The federal government, in cooperation with state and local governments, should ensure that the medical surge capacity needs associated with events of mass casualties and large outbreaks of infectious diseases can be met, particularly in communities that serve as regional medical centers.

Provide for a Stronger County, State and Federal Response to Future Disasters

Reimburse Counties and States for their Foster Care Expenses
States and counties should receive 100% reimbursement for all their expenses in foster care. Many of the counties and states that have taken in victims of Hurricane Katrina have higher payment rates. It is unfair to expect either the host or the home states to bear this financial burden.

Reimburse Counties and States for their Food Stamps Administrative Expenses
The federal government moved very quickly to ensure that the hurricane victims receive nutritional assistance through the food stamps electronic benefit transfer system. However, there are additional state administrative expenses associated with the increased payments that should be reimbursed.

County/Municipal Debt Relief
Counties continue to urge the federal government to provide simpler and more flexible criteria to determine whether arbitrage has been earned in using tax-exempt proceeds and to otherwise simplify current rules and statutes related to tax-exempt bonds. While these rules are complicated
and burdensome for all state and local governments, they impose particularly difficult, or even impossible, requirements on a jurisdiction that has lost access to offices, records or employees. The federal government must immediately provide such flexibility to jurisdictions that are affected by a major disaster. Credit assistance should be automatically applicable to all legitimate state and local borrowing, and should not be subject to elaborate administrative procedures. In addition, NACo supports providing an additional advance refunding of outstanding tax-exempt bonds as was provided to New York City in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

**Provide Immunity to Encourage Mutual Aid and Support**
The federal government and state governments, where applicable, should provide legal immunity from civil liability for counties and other local governments responding collaboratively to emergencies outside their primary jurisdiction. Also, the federal and state governments should allow reimbursement under public assistance for assistance rendered by mutual aid partners.

**Sustained Funding for the Army Corps of Engineers**
Substantial funds will be needed to repair/rebuild the levee system around New Orleans. Hazards to navigation need to be removed in the Mississippi and other affected rivers so that goods can move safely and efficiently on these inland waterways and so that Port of New Orleans and other ports along the Gulf Coast can return to full operations. Additionally, the federal government must work with state and local governments to address beach erosion and damage to wetlands.

**Reauthorization and Sustained funding for FEMA’s Predisaster Mitigation Grant Program**
The Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) program provides funds to states, and local communities for hazard mitigation planning and the implementation of mitigation projects prior to a disaster event. Funding these plans and projects reduces overall risks to the population and structures, while also reducing reliance on funding from actual disaster declarations. For a number of years, Congress has provided a short term authorization for this critical program. In addition, the program has seen its funding decrease as our nation’s public safety priorities have shifted from an all-hazard focus to combating domestic terrorism. Adequate funding must be allocated for preventative measures that protect property and save lives. The federal government must reauthorize the pre-disaster mitigation program.

**Support for Emergency Management**
In order to maintain an effective state and local emergency preparedness, prevention, response and recovery, Counties continue to support an investment in State and local emergency management. The Emergency Management Performance Grant Program (EMPG) assists in the development, maintenance, and improvement of state and local emergency management capabilities, which are key components of a comprehensive national emergency management system for disasters and emergencies that may result from natural disasters or accidental or terrorist events. EMPG provides the support that state and local governments need to achieve measurable results in key functional areas of emergency management. As a result, Counties continue to urge the federal government to provide maximum funding for the EMPG Program (EPMG), and maintain it as a separate account in the DHS budget.

**Post Disaster Hazard Mitigation**
In 2005, Congress has affirmed NACo’s request to maintain the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) formula for states with Enhanced Mitigation Plans at 20% of disaster costs, as opposed to the Administration’s requested change to 12.5%. "Enhanced Plan States" have made significant commitments to disaster mitigation. HMGP funds are used following a disaster, when awareness of risk is high and important mitigation measures have a broad base of support. The value of mitigation programs is enhanced in a post-disaster environment because of the
immediate awareness of risk and government willingness to commit state and local funds for cost-sharing with federal funds. In the tight fiscal situation that states and local communities are facing, the commitment of funds is most likely to occur when the devastation of a disaster proves the value of preventive measures. Furthermore, counties remains concerned that the regular HMGP program was reduced in the FY 2003 appropriations bill from 15% to 7.5%, and urges restoration of the 15% level. Reduced federal funding means a lost opportunity for communities and localities to act as partners and make positive use of the interest generated during the post-disaster period to reduce the costs of future catastrophes.

**Flood Map Modernization**

Counties are grateful that Congress has continued to provide funding to FEMA’s Flood Map Modernization Initiative. In the course of developing the initiative, mapping needs have been found to be greater than when they were originally projected in 1997. The 'population mapped' metric must be adjusted so that maps can be updated and not simply digitized with existing data, and the deadline for accomplishing this task should, therefore, be extended to integrate this necessary change. Up-to-date and modernized flood maps provide critical data necessary for responsible pre- and post-disaster mitigation planning by states and localities. These maps also ensure that the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) can function adequately in its role to meet citizens’ needs. As a result, NACo urge Congress to provide sustained funding to FEMA’s Flood Map Modernization Initiative.

**Restore Damaged Forest Ecosystems**

Natural catastrophes such as wildfires, tornadoes, wind storms, and insect epidemics are frequent occurrences in the forests of the United States. Because of catastrophic events nationwide, there are now over one million acres on our national forests in need of reforestation—and this number is increasing. Hurricane Katrina alone damaged or destroyed approximately 19 billion board feet of timber spread over five million acres in Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. Rapid assessment of damage, quick action, and funding are needed following catastrophic events to restore landscapes and prevent adding to the reforestation backlog. Furthermore, research is needed on the effects and effectiveness of some post catastrophe treatments. The Forest Emergency Recovery and Restoration Act introduced by Congressmen Greg Walden and Brian Baird should be enacted to protect forest counties and their communities.

**Training and Exercises for Preparing, Preventing, Response and Recovery to Disasters**

Currently, federal funding to state and local governments to train and exercise has been reduced. In order to prepare, prevent, respond and recover from disasters, first responders need additional federal support for training and exercises. Tailored training and exercises enhances the capacity of states and local jurisdictions to prepare, prevent, respond, and recover from all disasters.

**Assist Counties to Develop Evacuation Plans**

NACo urges Congress to assist local governments in developing comprehensive evacuation plans. The evaluation of transportation and other infrastructure systems and comprehensive evacuation planning are essential to reducing the loss of life during a disaster.

**Fund Local Public Health Emergency Preparedness**

Congress should continue to provide adequate funding for HHS cooperative agreements with States for public health emergency preparedness and give strong direction to the states to ensure that: 1) no less than 80% of the funds are used to improve local preparedness and local infrastructure; and 2) county public health agencies are consulted and concur with the state plans for expenditures of these funds.
**Train Health Personnel**
Public and private sector health personnel should receive adequate training to manage public health emergencies, in cooperation with federal, state and local governments. While specific training relative to bio-terrorism and other emerging threats are needed, general competency building in public health is also needed to assure that the workforce is fully prepared during times of disasters.

**Strengthen Federal Coordination**
A unified and standardized approach for federal agencies before and after a major disaster is critical. While such a plan exists (DHS’ National Response Plan), ongoing multi-jurisdictional efforts to recover from Hurricane Katrina have demonstrated the need for strengthened organization among federal agencies in order to improve coordination and communications with state and local government agencies.

For additional information or further discussion, please contact Edwin Rosado, NACo Legislative Director or Dalen Harris, NACo Associate Legislative Director at 202/393-6226 or email Erosado@naco.org or dharris@naco.org.