

**Written Testimony of
Mayor Brent Warr, City of Gulfport, Mississippi**

**Before the House Select Bipartisan Committee on Preparation and
Response to Hurricane Katrina.**

December 7, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of Congress, Thank you for the invitation to speak here today and for affording the city of Gulfport the opportunity to take part in the evaluation of the state of Mississippi's preparation and response efforts during Hurricane Katrina.

Before I begin with my assessment and suggestions for improvement, in all fairness, the unparalleled damage and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina was so unimaginable that no single agency or organization could have possibly been prepared for a storm of this magnitude. The City of Gulfport is extremely gratefully and appreciative of everyone on the local, county, state, and federal level who are assisting in the recovery process. It is with the greatest honor and respect that I thank President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Chertoff and the White House's Department of Intergovernmental Affairs. Heartfelt gratitude is also extended to Senator Thad Cochran, Senator Trent Lott, Congressman Gene Taylor, Congressman Roger Wicker, and Congressman Chip Pickering. I would also like to personally thank Congressman Steve Buyer from Indiana who traveled to our city and state in the days following the storm and who has also taken a sincere interest in the recovery efforts in our city. At the state and local levels, we owe a debt of gratitude to Mississippi Governor and Mrs. Haley Barbour and their dedicated staff, Col. Joe Spraggins, Director of the Harrison Civil Defense, and the Supervisors of Harrison County.

I would like to formally thank the Gulfport City Council for their tireless efforts on behalf of all the citizens. I loudly applaud the talents of Gulfport Fire Chief Pat Sullivan, Police Chief Steve Barnes, Public Works Director Kris Riemann, and the heroic first responders, the City of Gulfport's very able group of department heads, the city employees and the dogged determination of our citizens and volunteers from outside our community. There are so many more good Americans who have rolled up their sleeves and become part of the recovery of our community under the leadership of these fine people and we would not be as far along as we are today without their support.

Local and State Preparation, Planning & Coordination:

I took office as the new Mayor of the City of Gulfport on July 5, 2005 and on that day signed a State of Emergency due to the threat of Tropical Storm Cindy. During my first two weeks in office, the City of Gulfport was threatened by two impending storms -

Tropical Cindy and Hurricane Dennis. Assuming that a coastal city threatened by storms practically every year would have an emergency response plan in place, I quickly began to seek out and execute Gulfport's plan. However, much to my surprise, I learned that while each municipal department and public safety agency had trained and had its own individual plan, the city lacked a centralized emergency response plan for all to follow. Upon this realization, discussion began to take place about the emphatic need for a city emergency response plan, but too soon after, Hurricane Katrina developed in the Gulf, and once again, disaster was upon us.

As previously indicated, the Gulfport Police, Fire and Public Works departments do have emergency plans. Having participated in numerous disaster training exercises, the Gulfport Police and Fire Departments began pre-staging barricades, bringing in necessary equipment, double-checking its reserve fuel supplies, and arranging for fuel delivery post-storm. In addition, the Public Works Department began staging equipment and vehicles throughout the city, and filling elevated city water tanks to complete capacity for additional weight and wind resistance. These city departments are extremely competent and know what is needed and where it is needed and when it is needed. I submit to you that these local first responders are the backbone of the success of any emergency. Most suggestions for future improvements in emergency situations will emphasize policies that 1) further empower municipal agencies with resources and 2) speed response time for requests by these agencies.

The Harrison County Emergency Operations Center (EOC), under the leadership of Director Joseph Spraggins and the five county Board of Supervisors, functioned as the centralized command center for the county and its five municipalities. Liaisons from the various local, state, and federal agencies staffed the EOC around the clock beginning at noon, Saturday, August 27. All necessary meetings and advisories, such as evacuation orders, curfew orders, and shelter openings, were decided upon at the EOC during executive meetings with county and municipal law enforcement, county supervisors, and the five municipal mayors. Acting as united voice for all Harrison County residents, the EOC disseminated all official messages to the media and the public.

Mandatory evacuations for Zones A and B, all gulf-front real estate and low-lying properties, were ordered on Sunday, August 28, at 10 AM. While residents of Zone C, the highest elevations in the county, were not placed under a mandatory evacuation order due to large number of medical facilities in this zone and the potential risk to patients, officials strongly encouraged all residents to leave the area immediately.

Overall, evacuations went quite well for the City of Gulfport and the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast, but we now know that too many residents ignored the warnings, and chose to stay and ride out the storm. Residents who did obey evacuation orders fled the area by traveling north and east to avoid potential traffic congestion coming out of Louisiana from the west. And while evacuating the area was still a time consuming process, thankfully, public safety officials corrected the problem that caused such chaotic north-bound traffic congestion on Highway 49 into Hattiesburg during Hurricane Ivan, allowing evacuations to flow much smoother during Katrina.

To remedy the previously mentioned lack of a city plan, please allow me to make a prudent recommendation for municipalities. All communities in the storm prone-areas need a play book. Think of football, a team runs certain plays if they are on their 20 yard line and different plays if they are on their opponents' 20 yard line. If there is a Category 3 storm 300 miles out in the Gulf to our southeast likely to arrive during low tide, we should prepare in certain ways. If there is a Category 4 storm 200 miles to our southwest arriving during high tide, different things need to be done. Brief, specialized plans need to be written with tabs like a recipe book. If you want to bake this kind of cake, here are the ingredients – an example would be...

1. If the storm is coming in to the southwest, evacuate to the northeast
2. If you need space for 5,000 evacuees, open 5 shelters that hold at least 1,000 each, not 10 that hold 500 each. It takes the same amount of people to run either size.
3. If the storm surge is likely to come in at 30 feet above sea level, all manhole covers under 35 feet elevations in the area should be tack welded down 2 days prior to the storm, control panels for the electric service for sewer and water lift and pump stations should be built and on stand by. To the same end, power should be shut off to these services just prior to arrival of the storm when possible so if they become submerged, the units themselves don't melt down.
4. Diesel and gas generators should be on stand-by staged in different areas of the city and county filled with fuel and with standby fuel ready to serve. --We had to resort to siphoning fuel from wrecked vehicles in order to keep critical equipment running. No American community should ever again be reduced to this.

Local Use of Homeland Security Funds:

Homeland Security funds in the City of Gulfport are primarily used by public safety agencies to purchase protective equipment and to participate in a variety of preventative terrorism training exercises. However, the city's public works department recently used the funds secured by a \$100,000 grant to purchase the SCADA system, a computerized water monitoring system of wells, and this tool proved to be invaluable for the city post Katrina. This system allowed our Public Works Department to monitor the water levels at each of the city's sewer pump stations, water wells and elevated storage tanks through a remote site in Atlanta, Georgia that gave us accurate, up-to-the-minute information on the condition of our water and sewer infrastructure.

Understandably, while the focus of the Homeland Defense funding is to prevent a potential terrorism attack, history has proven that the Gulf Coast is much more likely to be struck by a hurricane than an act of terrorism. Therefore, it has been suggested by local public safety officials, that perhaps in the future, more of the Homeland Defense funding could be designated for all hazard training, and in particular for our area, hurricane preparedness and response training. Such funding would help alleviate the great financial burden training exercises often place on local law enforcement.

Response and Execution of County and State Response Plans:

The Harrison County Emergency Management Agency and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) activated and executed their emergency plan post Katrina. Numerous MEMA liaisons and FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team were on the ground within 24 hours. A steady caravan of first responders and crisis management teams from the state of Florida arrived daily, while additional support from the state of Virginia, California, Kansas and numerous other states continued to arrive throughout the following weeks/months.

On the federal side, a call from the White House's Department of Intergovernmental Affairs on Sunday began a relationship that has stood Gulfport in good stead. Direct communication with elected officials and their administrations in Washington has been appreciated. It was Sunday before Katrina that I learned that FEMA representative Mike Beeman was on his way to Gulfport. I want to commend and thank Mr. Beeman who was at the Harrison County Emergency Operations Center on Sunday night prior to the hurricane until just two weeks ago. Mr. Beeman certainly assisted our community with compassion and considerable knowledge. However, Mr. Beeman was one man dealing with an overwhelming volume of devastation. A more ideal scenario would be to have a FEMA representative on hand for each municipality. *This officer should be vested with authority to make real time decisions and the ability to cut thru red tape in acquiring vital needed assets.* This officer should also come into the city with a box full of FEMA guideline manuals –we did not know that there was such a thing until weeks after the storm. FEMA guidelines specify that a Public Assistance Officer will be assigned within 24 hours. It was far longer than that before the PAO was assigned and working with our city officials.

Unfortunately, the initial outpour of assistance was so overwhelming, that the coordination of the various law enforcement teams and volunteer groups often was unmanageable. Many groups who arrived wanting to help sat around for days before they were noticed or assigned. Best intentions to assist cities and citizens seemed to be lost in the magnitude of the disaster.

The city's ability to function was hindered by overlapping state and federal agencies working to fulfill their own missions when they tapped into some of our most vital resources. Fuel that was on order for the Gulfport Police Department was commandeered by Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) officials and redirected to unknown destinations, while numerous personnel were extracted by the National Guard from beleaguered Gulfport Public Safety Departments and redirected to other cities.

My last recommendation to this panel would be this: A team of those who lived through this experience should be assembled to sit down and develop a play book, a real plan, of real time preparations and solutions that could be followed to save many days

and hundreds of millions of local and federal dollars. This team should be challenged to develop the following:

- Development of an emergency plan for each city and any other populated area. Establish an organization of overall management and allocation of resources, (commodities, volunteers, donations) **create an asset management team or “Asset Commander” to allocate and move resources quickly and efficiently.
- Secure pre-existing contracts for immediate needs (water, ice, generators, lighting, portable showers and bathrooms, etc.) prior to the storm
- Maintain Trained Incident Command Teams on the County & Municipal level
- Take advantage of current technologies that can predict devastation levels, for example the 3-Dimensional Visualization Center located at the Center for Higher Learning at Stennis Space Center
- Establish closer relationship to federal installations giving the installations (i.e. Naval Construction Battalion Center, Keesler Air Force Base) more flexibility to work closer with the city/county authorities. This would be a logical use of on the ground federal assets.
- Promote thru funding Municipal Resource Reserves --have extra diesel on hand, gas reserves, transportation vehicles for both, generators.

Despite every municipal department and governmental agency plan, and enough personal and corporate experience to draw on to handle another storm (especially since several of us had lived through Hurricane Camille in 1969), there was no one who was prepared for a storm of this magnitude. When people ask who is to blame for the conditions after the storm, I sincerely answer...you can only blame Katrina. No one came to the Mississippi Gulf Coast intending to do a poor job. Were there things that could have been done better? – Absolutely. Are there organizations who did less than their mission statements? – Yes. Were there far more successes than failures?—yes. Ultimately I believe that locals can and should be responsible for themselves. I ask this panel to engage locals in searching out the ways and means of promoting the local readiness and abilities, supported by streamlined Federal assistance, so that the tools are in the hands of those whose homes, families, properties and lives are involved.

I once again sincerely thank you for the honor of appearing before you. The City of Gulfport thanks you for the important work you are doing and the improved safety and quality of life that it will ultimately bring. Thank you.