

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Of the
United States Senate
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March 1, 2006

Dear Chairman Enzi and Senator Kennedy:

Thank you very much for your invitation to participate in a roundtable discussion focusing on the contribution of community-based organizations to the relief and reconstruction effort on the Gulf Coast. I look forward to the opportunity to describe my experiences and offer my thoughts and suggestions.

Background

The destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, followed closely by Hurricane Rita, is unlike anything this country has seen. Amid the devastation, however, came an unprecedented outpouring of assistance from many levels. America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network, the nation's largest hunger-relief charity, was there to supply the basic necessities: food and water. With more than 200 food banks and food-rescue organizations serving all fifty states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, which in turn serve more than 50,000 charitable agencies, the America's Second Harvest Network provides emergency food assistance to approximately 25 million Americans each year. Because the America's Second Harvest Network is so expansive and experienced, when disaster strikes, we are ready to respond quickly and efficiently.

Our Disaster Experience

America's Second Harvest has been an active member of National VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) for many years. Our Vice-President of Programs (Christopher Rebstock) served as NVOAD's President and I currently am a member of the Board of Directors.

This involvement is not by happenstance; we long ago realized that the strength of one organization is complimented by the collective strength of many. America's Second Harvest values our partnerships pre and post disaster as this is how our network of food banks function to lessen hunger in the United States everyday.

America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network has a long standing Statement of Understanding with the American Red Cross and on August 9, 2005 we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal Emergency Management

Agency/Department of Homeland Security; never anticipating that just 19 days later the largest natural disaster in US history would begin. These are two examples of formalized relationships we have but dozens more informally exist as a matter of course. I would be remiss, however, if I did not specifically mention the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the USDA. Federal commodities are critical to food bank operations, whether in disaster mode or not. America's Second Harvest is very fortunate to have an excellent relationship with USDA and that relationship allowed for a very smooth transition to an emergency mode of operations during the disaster. With the USDA's commitment to meeting emergency needs during the hurricanes and their aftermath, commodity deliveries to food banks were quick and effective. While food banks in the affected areas did a tremendous job meeting immediate need, emergency food stamps issued by the USDA helped address more ongoing need.

Our food banks in the Gulf States and nation wide work daily to distribute donated food and grocery items to local charities that serve people in-need. These efforts doubled and redoubled after Katrina struck. Hundreds of local agencies ceased to exist post-storm and dozens of new agencies sprung into action to help people affected by the destruction. Local groups that had a NVOAD or state VOAD connection were the easiest routes to channel disaster response products towards. Other groups needed to be quickly educated on the standards set by America's Second Harvest before they could safely and efficiently access food from a local food bank. This procedure was time consuming but food bankers are flexible people that streamlined processes in order to expeditiously get food to the affected areas.

Knowing that the hurricanes had significantly altered the landscape of the Network as well as the face of demand for food assistance, America's Second Harvest has sought to quantify such changes. Last November, America's Second Harvest devised a plan to interview clients in food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters to learn more about the circumstances that led them to seek emergency food assistance and better understand their needs, and to survey provider agencies and food bank representatives to assess how the hurricanes affected service delivery. The end result was an assessment of the impact of Katrina and Rita on charitable food assistance delivery that will enable the America's Second Harvest Network to be even more effective in responding to future disasters. I would like to share some of the results of that study with you.

Clients:

- Demands for food assistance overall in the Gulf Coast States are 50% above pre-Katrina levels.
- 72% of clients seeking food assistance in the impacted states were first time clients, tripling the demands in the impacted states as a result of the hurricanes.
- One in nine households representing 6.4 million people in the impacted states received food assistance.
- Nearly 40% of the households requesting food assistance were African American.
- 31% of households requesting food assistance had a child 12 years of age or younger.

- Households seeking emergency food assistance had median incomes of \$26,000 compared to \$42,000 for the total area; 21% report having an income less below \$10,000—more than twice the percentage found throughout the area.
- 28% of the people seeking emergency food assistance immediately after Katrina were already receiving food assistance before the hurricane hit.
- 77% of the new food recipients no longer needed assistance following the “peak” period in October. Of the people still requesting food assistance, 65% were already receiving food assistance prior to Katrina.

Food Banks Respond:

- America's Second Harvest—The Nation’s Food Bank Network provided an unprecedented response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma with more than 1,600 truckloads carrying 62 million pounds of food providing approximately 48 million meals valued at an estimated \$84 million.
- 39 of 210 (13%) of America's Second Harvest Members are located in the impacted states.
- Two food banks in the primary markets reported a three-fold increase in food distribution since Katrina. The Bay Area Food Bank in Mobile, AL reported a ten-fold increase at the peak of the relief effort, tapering off to 75 percent now.
- Secondary markets reported an average of 60% increase in food distribution.

Agency Infrastructure:

- 41% of the people receiving food assistance prior to Katrina report that the agency where they received assistance is no longer in operation.
- The primary markets reported 86% of their agencies currently being served were temporary disaster-relief programs.
- 80% of clients receiving food assistance prior to Katrina reported food availability being the same or better following Katrina.

Issues to Consider

Local Emergency Management and City Government officials would be wise to include the non governmental organizations (NGO’s) and State VOAD members in ALL exercises, drills and planning meetings. The time to exchange business cards and decide who has what skills and abilities is not after a disaster strikes. NGO’s must be included in all pre-event planning and in the mitigation process in order to be effective. Government officials at all levels must broaden their definition of ‘first responders’ beyond police officers and fire fighters. NGO’s are first responders by design but are somewhat neglected in the emergency management cycle.

On the State level, Emergency Operation Centers coast-to-coast must have a seat for their State VOAD representatives. This not only puts the collective abilities of the NGO’s at the Governor’s doorstep but it also opens up resources for the charities to access in order

to get their jobs done. Each State needs to also include NGO's at all stations of their planning.

For the Federal side of this equation, the issues get much more convoluted. The single greatest asset that NGO's have in the disaster arena is the FEMA VAL's (Voluntary Agency Liaisons). This core of twelve seasoned FEMA employees and their liaison at FEMA's Response and Recovery Directorate in Washington, DC, gives a vital lifeline between the decisions made in Washington and the NGO's actually doing the job on the ground. The VAL's helped America's Second Harvest access scarce fuel, permits and other resources in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama when no answers were forthcoming from State EOC offices. The VAL's need to be made permanent, core positions in the FEMA structure.

The Public Private Partnership Office of the Department of Homeland Security was an outstanding resource in countless ways during the response in the Gulf. This office helped America's Second Harvest secure much needed warehouse space for disaster supplies in Louisiana and helped to secure lodging for food bank responders. The DHS oversight of FEMA adds a layer to the communications channels but fortunately my office knew who to call at the right time for the right answers. This was by design but occasionally good fortune smiled upon us.

During the 2005 hurricane season there were occasions when State and Federal entities were competing with non-profit organizations for financial contributions. Governors were setting up relief funds and the Clinton-Bush Fund was also appealing for support. These admirable efforts take away desperately needed sources from community groups, faith based organizations, NGO's and VOAD members. Time and effort then needs to be expended applying to the big funds so charities can continue their jobs. A corporate CEO is not going to say 'no' when a former President of the United States knocks on his door or when the governor calls, but that diminishes the timely support available to non-profits. There are only so many slices in the charitable pie.

Another tidbit for the Federal issue is for FEMA/DHS to fully and eternally fund the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, MD. This world class facility was where all new-comers to disaster management went to cut their teeth on critical issues like donations management, incident command and unaffiliated volunteers. EMI gave everyone (Governmental and NGO's) a common basis of knowledge and usable training to take into the field. The EMI VAL position was eliminated due to budget cuts and restructuring a few years ago; this critical position needs to be re-established and supported.

Based on my experience, it is only the military that would have had the ability to handle the affects of hurricane Katrina alone. This brings to mind an area where your influence would be extremely valuable at the local, county and State levels. In Mississippi our food banks worked closely with the Mississippi National Guard – this marriage of resources made perfect sense, we had the food they had the trucks and personnel to get into areas cut off from normal distribution channels. In Texas after hurricane Rita it was a completely different story. The Texas National Guard was ordered not to transport any relief supplies on their vehicles if those supplies came from a non-profit organization.

Any assistance that you can offer to help NGO's standardize relationships with National Guard Command from State to State would be greatly appreciated.

Finally, I submit to you that NGO's, VOAD members, faith based organizations and community groups would be best served at all levels of Government if the playing field was level. For example; low interest disaster mitigation loans are available to for-profit small business owners to reinforce a roof or install a generator for back up power through the Small Business Administration. However, non-profit organizations like the 213 food banks in the America's Second Harvest Network are not even allowed to apply for these types of urgently needed loans. This disparity becomes even more confusing because non-profits can apply to the SBA to rebuild after their facilities are destroyed. The logic is not bubbling to the surface here.

Food banks, some houses of worship and other non-profit buildings are distributing relief supplies hours and often days before State and Federal resources can access hard hit communities after a disaster. Shouldn't these valuable organizations at least have access to funds that can help them do better during the worst of times?

In preparation for the upcoming 2006 hurricane season (as well as whatever else Mother Nature throws at us) America's Second Harvest has recently conducted a Disaster Debrief Conference in Chicago for those food banks that were primarily affected and secondarily supported the relief efforts from Katrina & Rita & Wilma. We are collecting and deciphering our internal lessons learned in order to strengthen our ability to respond when a disaster strikes. Our Network and those agencies we worked with did a tremendous amount of good to alleviate suffering this past year – but we know that as local and State Emergency Management offices and DHS focuses and invests more on terrorism issues, the natural disaster response and long term recovery will fall more and more onto the shoulders of the community based organizations.

Again I want to express my appreciation for your invitation to take part in this discussion and I hope that our meeting will be the first of many that will help us all learn where the shortcomings could have been avoided and to also celebrate the chance to duplicate the successes when things worked well.

Respectfully submitted by Craig A Nemitz, CEM
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