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When governments fail citizens

September 8, 2005

The flood that devastated New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina also overwhelmed every level of government. As the scale and scope of an unprecedented modern American disaster unfolded, everyone in charge failed at some point, from President Bush down to local cops who walked off the job.

While 80 percent of New Orleans was flooded, with no communication, no electricity and no relief in sight, tens of thousands of frightened citizens unable or unwilling to evacuate before the storm were marooned for days in squalor.

Government could not stop the hurricane. But there wasn't anything to prevent a more efficient evacuation and a quicker rescue other than a compendium of ham-fisted responses.

In this country, the responsibility to painstakingly prepare for emergencies, and to cope as they unfold, rests with local and state authorities. When they're in over their heads, they have the power to request federal help. Citizens have a right to expect that help to be targeted wisely and delivered as speedily as possible.

In this case, local and state officials whiffed. The order to evacuate came too late, provisions to rescue residents who didn't own autos collapsed, and when survivors headed to higher ground at the Louisiana Superdome, officials didn't provide adequate food, water or security.

The initial federal response, through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, was a tangle of red tape. It wasn't until several days after the flooding that the cavalry arrived: 6,500 National Guard troops. Relief supplies followed, order was restored and an evacuation proceeded.

Once the flood survivors are stabilized, Americans will demand that officials at all levels of government sort out what went so horrendously wrong. The president and Congress have vowed to investigate. One logical tool: an independent, bipartisan panel, like the 9/11 Commission, to autopsy these failings and prescribe remedies for the future.

Some quick measures are obvious. During and after a disaster, somebody has to be in charge. Notice how New Orleans calmed quickly once the so-called "John Wayne Dude," Army Gen.

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Russell Honore, showed up. Disaster plans aren't worth the paper they're written on, says Rutgers University sociologist Lee Clarke, unless people know and trust the plans and, more important, have "trust in the people claiming to protect them." Honore gained that trust the old-fashioned way. He put his boots on the ground, along with the boots of the troops who accompanied him.

Disaster-response has to be streamlined. In short, someone with the clout of a Cabinet officer has to be able to get the bureaucracy to move. There are too many stories now of physicians, firefighters and trailers full of supplies sitting idle while FEMA bureaucrats dither over paperwork. Once a Cabinet-level agency, FEMA is now inside the Department of Homeland Security, the gigantic bureaucracy created in the wake of Sept. 11. FEMA apparently took its eye off the mission of responding to hurricanes, tornadoes and floods as it concentrated on the task of combating terrorism. When the flooding hit New Orleans, FEMA evidently was unprepared--a judgment investigators need not only to confirm, but to quantify.

There's more: Communications systems snapped after the attacks on the World Trade Center and broke down again as the flood hit New Orleans. Local police and firefighters need to connect with state and federal agencies. Technology exists to create such systems, but not enough of them are in place across the U.S.

When governments fail citizens, we need to ask why. And so, as the waters recede, we can lament Katrina ... and we can learn from her.

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