

## Speed Resources to the States -- September 2005

By: Delaware Congressman Mike Castle

Hurricane Katrina was the most significant test of our revamped national preparedness and response system since Sept. 11, 2001, and in many respects it failed. Thousands of people in Louisiana and Mississippi were left without food, water or adequate shelter. That simply should not happen in a country with as many assets as ours.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which was brought under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security after the terrorist attacks of 2001, did not coordinate well with state and local authorities. Emergency response was plagued by many of the same communication failures that hampered rescue efforts four years ago.

In the days since Hurricane Katrina, much like those following 9/11, Congress has taken steps to supplement response efforts through emergency spending bills. The House and Senate have passed, and the president has signed, emergency appropriations bills totaling \$62 billion, to be allocated through FEMA. Millions of Americans also joined the effort through monetary donations and gifts of supplies.

Still, this generosity is futile unless FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security can ensure that funding is utilized where it is needed, without delay. In most circumstances, this means getting adequate resources to state and local authorities that have access to the people on the ground.

Based on my experiences at both the state and federal levels of government, I believe local officials can be very effective in distributing resources and directing first responders in disaster situations.

The commission that investigated the 2001 attacks noted that one of our government's greatest stumbling blocks was its ineffective method for distributing resources to first responders across the country. This past spring I joined Sen. Susan Collins of Maine in introducing legislation that would help streamline the process by which state and local governments receive emergency preparedness funds. This legislation would take steps to ensure that communities have appropriate levels of emergency personnel, planning and equipment to prevent, prepare and respond to terrorism, natural disasters and other catastrophic events.

On Sept. 11, we experienced the unthinkable and emerged from it with determination and purpose. Now, as we face the devastation of a second major disaster, there remains an enormous amount left to be done.

More than 46,000 National Guardsmen, including hundreds from the Delaware National Guard, and about 23,000 active-duty personnel are currently working alongside FEMA to improve conditions on the Gulf Coast. As we keep the Sept. 11 victims and Gulf Coast residents in our thoughts, we must come together in the heroic spirit of the citizens and emergency personnel who have stood tall in the face of destruction.

We must do everything in our power to prepare first responders in the event that it happens again.