

**Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Committee**

**“Recovering from Hurricane Katrina:
Responding to the Immediate Needs of Its Victims”**

September 28, 2005

Today, the Committee holds its second hearing on what is being done to meet the immediate needs of the people of the Gulf Coast whose lives were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. This Committee is undertaking an in-depth investigation into the inadequate preparedness and response to the hurricane, but our immediate focus is on ensuring that bureaucratic roadblocks, inflexible policies, outdated laws, and wasteful practices do not impede the prompt and compassionate delivery of needed assistance.

On September 16th, I joined a group of Senators – including Senators Lieberman and Warner from this Committee – on a tour of this stricken region. The scenes of destruction we all have seen on television only hint at the reality. Tragically, our first-hand look at the wreckage Katrina left in its wake coincided with the first look many people of the Gulf Coast got of their destroyed homes and communities some two weeks after the storm hit. For many, a water-stained family photograph, a mud-caked Bible, or a cherished heirloom unearthed from the rubble is all that is left. For others, there is not even that.

In Pass Christian, Mississippi, Malcolm Jones, that small city's acting Mayor, walked with us through the rubble of his community. I did not see a single undamaged home.

Reopening the schools and restoring water and sewer services are but a few of the massive challenges that must be met for Pass Christian to emerge from the rubble and again become the pretty community it once was.

Today, the Gulf Coast is at once a region of tears and a region of great determination. It is also a region that needs help and has encountered frustration in getting answers and assistance.

Rebuilding homes, jobs, schools, utilities and everything else that make a community are urgent priorities. But as the rebuilding for tomorrow proceeds, we must meet the immediate needs of today. Mayor Jones expressed to us his frustration in trying to get permission from FEMA to proceed with urgent infrastructure repairs. Senator Trent Lott has

told me that FEMA has been too slow in distributing basic supplies, even food.

Throughout the country, and especially throughout the South, communities have shown great compassion in taking in the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have been displaced. This compassion carries a great cost. Communities that have provided shelter, schools, and medical care to displaced families wonder if they will receive any financial relief any time soon.

Our witnesses today represent four of these generous communities.

Harris County, Texas, which includes the city of Houston, had, at one point, some 27,000 evacuees in such facilities as the Astrodome, the Houston Arena, and the Expo Center. It is

essential that these thousands of people be moved from such mass shelters to more suitable housing. This process is under way, but the pressure on local resources is great, and made even greater by Hurricane Rita.

The population of Baton Rouge has exploded by 50 percent since Katrina. It is now the largest city in Louisiana. The city continues to grow daily, and some of this growth may be permanent. The demands this unexpected growth has imposed on police, fire, and EMS personnel, on schools, hospitals, utilities, and every other aspect of community life are enormous.

Just 130 miles from New Orleans, Brookhaven, Mississippi, suffered major damage from Katrina. It now is on the front lines of the recovery effort as a major relief center, including as a Red Cross staging area. Despite their own

needs, the people of Brookhaven have opened their homes, their churches, their schools, and their stores to others in greater need. Brookhaven is clearly a town of very special people.

Arkansas has received more Katrina evacuees per capita than any other state: in excess of 75,000 at the peak, primarily in Fayetteville and the surrounding area. Today, as many as 50,000 remain, a great many in private homes, church camps, and even a vacated jail. These displaced families are being cared for by one of the poorest states in the nation. Schools are stressed beyond capacity, yet they are committed to educating these thousands of new students.

The communities represented by our panel today have been shining examples of generosity and caring.

As I said at our first hearing, Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster followed by a manmade debacle. It is essential that we first concentrate on overcoming that initial failure and providing effective, efficient, and speedy relief for the victims of Katrina. Once that is done, we must learn what went wrong, why it went wrong, and what we can do to fix the problems.

Meeting the needs of the victims is our first priority, but we are also concerned about protecting against waste, fraud and abuse. We need to make sure that resources are not squandered when the needs are so great. This concern about wasteful spending is not merely hypothetical. Last week, for example, dozens of truckloads of ice ordered by the federal government for Katrina victims at great cost arrived at the Gulf Coast, only to be diverted more than 1,600 miles away where they ended up, in all places, in my home state of Maine.

The American taxpayers, and especially the Katrina victims, cannot endure this kind of wasteful spending. With billions of dollars being appropriated for recovery efforts, we must ensure that this money is spent wisely. Creating a Chief Financial Officer and establishing a Special Inspector General are essential safeguards that cannot wait.

Before calling on our witnesses, I want to provide a brief update on our investigation. Today, we will send the first document requests to federal and state entities – they are extensive. We are also working closely with the GAO and the Inspectors General. Next week, our investigators will be on-site in Louisiana. And also next week, the Acting FEMA Director, David Paulison, will testify before our Committee.