

LIEBERMAN CALLS USGC “MODEL” GOVERNMENT AGENCY

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Wednesday delivered the following statement at a Committee hearing entitled, “Always Ready: The Coast Guards Response to Hurricane Katrina.” The Coast Guard was one of the more successful agencies that prepared for and responded to Hurricane Katrina, and Lieberman said other agencies should learn from the Coast Guard’s successes.

“Thanks, Madame Chairman, once again, for holding this sixth in a series of hearings examining the preparations for and response to Hurricane Katrina on the part of various government agencies.

“Today, I’m happy to say, we will examine the pre- and post- Katrina efforts of one of the better performing governmental agencies – the United States Coast Guard. The Coast Guard Academy, of course, is located in my home state, and I like to think that the training Coast Guard officers receive there sets them on the course toward heroic accomplishments, like those we witnessed in the wake of Katrina. I want to offer a special welcome to Captain Frank Paskewich, who not only graduated from the academy - as did Rear Admiral Robert Duncan - but who also hails from New London and whose mother still lives in Groton. Welcome to all three of you, and thank you for a job well done.

“As you gentlemen know, the modern Coast Guard is a combination of several historical agencies, including one once known as the Life Saving Service. In the hours and days after Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, the Guard more than lived up to its predecessor’s name. The advance planning, quick decision-making, and round-the-clock effort of the men and women under your command led to the rescue of 33,000 people in a matter of days – eight times the number of search and rescue missions you generally perform in one year. That is a record that deserves hosannas.

“Why was the Coast Guard able to perform at such a high standard? One of the most important reasons, I think, was that you were well prepared. As we will hear from our witnesses, the units operating under Rear Admiral Duncan began preparing for Hurricane Katrina several days before landfall. The week before the hurricane struck, for example, the helicopters based at the New Orleans air station were inspected, in anticipation of a heavy workload after the storm. One of the helicopters, in fact, needed a major repair, which was made well in advance of the storm. Who knows how many people might have died in rising flood waters if that helicopter had not been available?

“With Continuity of Operations plans in place, Coast Guard officers had blueprints to follow. Assuming a worst case scenario, Admiral Duncan, Captain Paskewich, and Captain Jones evacuated their respective staffs and critical assets the weekend before Katrina, and established remote command centers. Admiral Duncan had the additional foresight to request back-up helicopters, air crew, and ships. All of these measures were taken well before landfall and well before Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff formally declared an Incident of National Significance on Tuesday, August 30.

“The Guard was not only prepared but it executed its mission with precision. And I think, in this case, the victims of the hurricane benefited tremendously from quick, on-target decisions made by the folks at the scene – Captains Paskewich, Jones and their colleagues – who knew what and where the problems were and wasted no time in addressing them.

“In addition to its successful search and rescue missions, the Coast Guard ensured the Mississippi River was navigable as soon as possible after the storm hit, in order to maintain the free flow of commerce on the river. It helped restore navigational aids that were damaged or destroyed on the river and around the Louisiana coast, and worked with the Army Corps of Engineers and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to make channels navigable again. As soon as the Friday after the hurricane, some traffic was already back on these key waterways.

“The Guard also assisted with environmental hazards, identifying eight oils spills around New Orleans and working with other agencies and private contractors to clean them up.

“As well prepared as the Coast Guard was for Katrina, and as well as it performed, there is always room for improvement. Information sharing occurs less often than it should in the federal government and Hurricane Katrina was no exception. For example, the Coast Guard did not send its first written report acknowledging the levee breaks until the early morning hours of Tuesday, August 30. But, the Committee has learned that Admiral Duncan had two phone conversations Monday, August 29, with the Coast Guard Commandant in Washington. And we know the Commandant had phone conversations with Deputy Homeland Security Secretary Michael Jackson on Monday and Tuesday. I am eager to hear about the contents of those conversations because Secretary Chertoff, as well as other top federal officials, have suggested that they were in the dark about the severity of the situation Monday.

“More thought also should have been given to establishing a temporary means of communication since the flooding took out most telephone communications. We do know the Coast Guard was able to use its own and Customs Department airplanes as temporary communications relay stations, however, there was no specific plan in place and perhaps there should be.

“Nevertheless, on balance, the Coast Guard performed the way I wish all government agencies had performed - with speed, resourcefulness, bravery, efficiency, and success. You are a model for the rest of government, and I hope other agencies will learn from your achievements.

“I have written to OMB Director Bolton asking for an additional \$500 million for the Coast Guard to cover the costs related to your work in the wake of Katrina. I know many of your facilities have been severely damaged and some were completely ruined. And, obviously, you have expenses related to the evacuation and temporary housing of your staffs and for unanticipated fuel costs.

“Apparently, OMB plans to include about \$270 million in supplemental Coast Guard funding. That just is not enough, and so I urge the Administration to rethink its supplemental budget.

“Gentlemen, I look forward to hearing your testimony.”