

LEARNING LESSONS FROM NEW ORLEANS

Some say we should use regulations, taxes to reduce our exposure to nature's fury
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The severity of future New Orleans-style catastrophes could be lessened if local, state and federal authorities started using tax law and toughened home-building regulations to discourage population growth in disaster-prone regions such as coastlines frequently hit by hurricanes or earthquake-vulnerable terrain such as the Bay Area.

That's one imaginative idea being kicked around by America's emergency planning experts in the aftermath of the New Orleans debacle. In interviews and e-mail exchanges, they also cited other national lessons learned from this week's catastrophe, such as the need for improved mass transport and housing of refugees, as well as better public education about simple, personal ways to prepare for disasters.

Gazing at TV images of the chaos in New Orleans, many Americans find it hard to believe that governmental agencies could be handling the crisis so badly, four years after the Sept. 11 terror attacks jolted the nation's emergency planners into revamping their planning and beefing up their resources.

Levee breaks, communications failures, random gunfire, looting, rapes, people without food and water for days, floating bodies, official talk about declaring martial law, wildly varying estimates of body counts, rescue buses that never show up, shoot-to-kill orders, swarms of refugees reminiscent of the dust bowl Okies: It all sounds like the first reel of the movie "War of the Worlds."

Americans might take note and wonder if the New Orleans debacle is a "canary in the mine" for the nation's local, state and federal emergency planners -- a hint of fundamental flaws in our ability to handle urban disasters.

"What we are seeing in New Orleans demonstrates that we have a lot of work to do. We are not where we need to be four years after 9/11," said Philip Crowley, director of national defense and homeland security at the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank. "What we see ... could very easily be duplicated in any major urban center with (the terrorist explosion of) a radiological (bomb) or other event involving mass casualties and mass disruption."

Eric Holdeman, director of the King County Office of Emergency Management in Renton, Wash., said the civil chaos in New Orleans "is making us look like a Third World country."

In an e-mail to The Chronicle, Holdeman called for restoring the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency to a Cabinet-level position and "take it out of the Department of Homeland Security -- they have shown no interest in natural disasters."

Social scientists who study so-called natural disasters like to point out that they aren't entirely "natural." They're also sociological, often the result of peoples' choice to live in harm's way, whether in a Florida condo overlooking hurricane-haunted seas or in a California A-frame overlooking a scenic valley carved by an earthquake fault.

Thus, the New Orleans disaster should inspire dramatic actions including overt federal efforts -- using novel tax laws -- to discourage population growth in disaster-prone areas, said Richard Moore, president-elect of the Florida Emergency Preparedness Association.

"We need to give financial incentives, such as federal tax breaks, to people who willingly relocate to noncoastal areas," said Moore. "Federal taxes for businesses located in coastal areas should be higher than those in noncoastal areas."

The nation should also "establish dramatically stronger building codes," Moore said. He suggests tying federal reimbursements to disaster victims to whether their properties meet tough building codes. He would also establish "dramatically stronger limits on building in environmentally 'dangerous' areas. "

"We need to heed the warnings of (hurricanes) Hugo, Andrew, Charley, Frances, Jeanne, Ivan and Katrina," he said. "How many warnings do we need?"

Indeed, this week's disaster did not sneak up on New Orleans. In 2002, the New Orleans Times-Picayune ran a five-part series titled "Washing Away," with the subhead: "It's only a matter of time before South Louisiana takes a direct hit from a major hurricane. Billions have been spent to protect us, but we grow more vulnerable every day." That same year, FEMA and local officials hosted a big conference on "flood insurance" in New Orleans.

There are other lessons to learn from the New Orleans mess, said emergency planning experts.

-- Pour more emergency planning dollars into public education to teach people what to expect in an emergency.

Too many people assume that in any disaster, government agencies will step in to save them, said Gunnar J. Kuepper of Los Angeles, president of the Region 9 chapter of the International Association of Emergency Managers, a trade association. So they ignore warnings about possible catastrophes and don't bother with simple precautions such as storing bottled water, candles, flashlights and extra batteries.

Kuepper says it's especially important to educate children, who, because of their youth, are likelier to take such warnings seriously. "Look how many children put on seat belts because they've been educated to do so, while their parents don't," Kuepper said.

-- Prepare better for mass transport and housing of refugees. "Shelter at the (New Orleans) Superdome failed," Crowley said. "Shelter at the Astrodome is also likely to fail. We need to be better able to quickly disperse large numbers of people more broadly and quickly integrate them into alternate living situations."

-- Take care of the special needs of low-income citizens. New Orleans has a large impoverished population, many of whom ended up sweltering and going hungry inside the Superdome.

When some future disaster hits earthquake-prone Los Angeles, people "who live in Beverly Hills will take the next private jet to Las Vegas," Kuepper said. "So we'll have to prepare (to deal with) the needs of people who don't have that kind of economic means -- people who live in the South Central area, in Watts, in certain areas of the San Fernando Valley."

As the New Orleans disaster unfolds, experts caution that it's too soon to play the blame game; the task at hand is to save lives.

But "many of us warned that this was coming," said Timothy M. Kusky, an associate professor of geoscience at Saint Louis University whose 2003 book "Geological Hazards" prophesied the disaster in these words: "If a fast-moving and powerful hurricane ever makes a direct hit on New Orleans, it will likely initiate one of the most serious natural disasters that this nation has ever seen."

On the other hand, Kusky told The Chronicle, "the (officials') decision to protect New Orleans against a Category 3 hurricane -- and not a 4 or 5 (like Katrina) -- was a cost versus risk decision, hard to make at the time when other issues also demand money."

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