
(October 12, 2005) LIPINSKI RESPONDS TO HURRICANE KATRINA

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Mr. LIPINSKI. Mr. Speaker, the whole country continues to be focused on the millions of Americans who have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina. As we begin to understand the enormity of the situation in the gulf region, it is becoming clear that this is one of the worst natural disasters to ever strike our country. My thoughts and prayers go out to the families grieving the loss of their loved ones and to the survivors who are struggling to cope and to find shelter, food, and medical care in the wake of this terrible disaster.

These are the moments that we realize that we are our brothers' keepers. It is clear that we must all come together to help our fellow citizens. And Americans are donating record amounts of money, time, and supplies to help those who are displaced by the hurricane. The most important thing right now is to make sure that we are saving lives and we are providing the food, shelter, and medical care for the people affected by this tragedy.

As has happened in many other States, four jetliners arrived yesterday in my home State of Illinois with the first group of 540 hurricane evacuees; and Illinois expects to provide housing, food, and medical care for up to 10,000 evacuees.

I am pleased that Congress was called back to Washington last week for a special session to pass the \$10.5 billion in relief funding for the victims of this horrific natural disaster. This funding is only the first step on a long and challenging path to recovery for the entire gulf coast region.

Unfortunately, many of the victims have had to endure not only the natural disaster of Katrina but also the unnatural disaster of the delayed and deeply flawed relief effort. In this time immediately following the disaster, we have an obligation to correct the mistakes in crisis response. We must find answers to basic questions that the American people are asking right now as they watch the aftermath unfolding on their television screens minute by minute and hour by hour. They are saying over and over again to themselves, How could this have happened in the United States of America, the most powerful country on the Earth? How could our country allow people to die without getting them water, food, and medical care?

One thing that is clear is that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, must assume a large share of the blame for the woefully inadequate response to the hurricane. Somehow FEMA has lost its way. During the Clinton administration, FEMA was transformed into an exemplary and effective cabinet-level agency under the leadership of James Lee Witt, a veteran emergency director. Unfortunately, as part of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the President and Congress moved FEMA from an independent, cabinet-level rank to a subagency of the Department of Homeland Security under the authority of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

It is time for us to return FEMA to its status as a cabinet-level agency that reports directly to the President and establish it once again as an independent agency.

I have signed on to legislation to do this, and I urge my colleagues to quickly and carefully review this bill.

We have important questions to answer about how the Federal Government could have better handled the events that unfolded as a result of this catastrophe. These are serious questions on which we all need to work together. We need to make sure that we are responding quickly not only to those in need today, but also prepare for anything that may happen in the future.

Today, we live under the specter of terrorist attacks, and we may face a situation much worse than we have faced with Katrina. We have to be ready. We have to learn from this catastrophe, from the mistakes and the lack of adequate response, and we have to quickly fix the problems. As we have all too painfully seen, the lives of millions of Americans depend on how we handle this, depend on how FEMA handles these emergencies. So it depends on what we here in Congress do to correct this situation so it never happens again.