

Despite problems, FEMA belongs in Homeland Security

By DAVID H. SCHANZER

As hurricane season approaches, proposals to reform, reinvent or eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency are blowing through Congress with gale force strength. Congress must take care, however, that in satisfying the need to respond to the Hurricane Katrina debacle, it refrains from taking action that actually damages our ability to deal with future disasters, whether caused by nature or man.

The debate over FEMA reform takes us back four years to discussions over how to best organize the government following the attacks of 9/11. In July 2002, President Bush reversed his earlier position and endorsed a large-scale reorganization of the government to bring together disparate agencies with core responsibilities for preventing and responding to terrorist attacks. As the lead federal agency for preparing communities for disasters and responding once disaster struck, FEMA was included in the reorganization plan and ultimately transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

A myriad of post-Katrina investigations have found, however, that the FEMA we have today is not the FEMA that was considered a model agency during much of the 1990s.

Many, including the respected former FEMA Director James Lee Witt, have concluded that FEMA's inclusion in Homeland Security, together with a series of policy changes, have diminished FEMA's authority and stature and are to blame for its poor performance during Katrina.

Endorsing this reasoning, proposals have been introduced in the Senate and House to restore FEMA's independent status and enable its director to report directly to the president. Members of congressional homeland security committees, however, have proposed to strengthen and reform FEMA (as well as rename and reorganize the agency), but to leave it within Homeland Security.

While this might seem an esoteric debate that has little meaning for those who will become hurricane victims over the coming months, much more is at stake. Ripping

FEMA out of Homeland Security would represent an abandonment of the concept that our government must be organized to handle the threats of the 21st century.

The decades to come may well bring more frequent and stronger hurricanes, pandemic outbreaks of disease and, potentially, attacks involving weapons of mass destruction. To deal with these threats, we need to identify what went wrong during Katrina and improve the performance of our post-9/11 governmental structures. Trying to undo the reorganization from three years ago will diminish, not improve, our capabilities.

“While this might seem an esoteric debate that has little meaning for those who will become hurricane victims over the coming months, much more is at stake.”

Mistakes were clearly made when FEMA was moved. First, political appointees without emergency management experience were put in charge of the agency. Second, responsibility for preparing communities for disasters was separated from responsibility for response and recovery. This organizational divide ignored the reality that relationships

8 Sanford Institute's Public Policy Focus



developed while preparing communities for disasters can determine the effectiveness of the response when disaster strikes.

Third, billions in grant funds issued to states and localities emphasized terrorism preparedness and response, instead of an “all-hazards” approach encompassing the planning, procedures and training common to dealing with both natural disasters and terrorist attacks. The Homeland Security department truly intended to maintain the all-hazards approach, but the grant programs’ terrorism focus skewed this principle

and got the entire agency off track.

These mistakes can all be remedied, but not by separating FEMA from Homeland Security. Removing FEMA would distance it from the department's resources and substantial budget, including assets critical to its mission, such as the Coast Guard, the National Communications System and Homeland Security's huge cadre of law enforcement personnel.

Even if FEMA is made independent, the large preparedness grant programs, which shape the entire national preparedness

effort, will remain at Homeland Security. Readjusting these programs toward an all-hazards approach will be possible with FEMA in the department, but it is far less likely if FEMA leaves.

An independent FEMA would also require state and local disaster officials, charitable organizations like the Red Cross and the private sector to deal with two federal agencies instead of one. The post-9/11 world requires that we better integrate and coordinate government functions, not head in the opposite direction.

It would be ideal if we could return to decades past, when our main domestic security concerns were hurricanes and earthquakes. But the complex challenges of the 21st century, including a potential WMD attack, require that FEMA be woven into the fabric of our national program for preparing communities to deal with disasters. With some effort, this can be accomplished in the Department of Homeland Security. It cannot if, in a pique of Katrina-induced anger, Congress begins to unravel the new department and sets FEMA off on its own.

Schanzer is director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University and UNC-Chapel Hill and a visiting associate professor of the practice of PPS. This commentary was first published May 12 in the *Raleigh News and Observer*.