

**U.S. Emergency Management Authority  
Senator Joe Lieberman  
For the Record  
July 25, 2006**

Thanks, Madam Chairman. I offer my support for and co-sponsorship of this legislation, which is based on our investigation into the failed preparations and response to Hurricane Katrina and which would guarantee the American people a better response in a catastrophe than we have seen in the past.

We are grateful for the Senate vote last month affirming our desire to build a new, stronger emergency management authority within the Department of Homeland Security. We look forward to similar affirmation of the legislation we are marking up today, which implements many of the other key recommendations from the Committee's investigation into Katrina.

While some agencies, like the Coast Guard, performed admirably, this Committee's investigation into the response to Hurricane Katrina found a variety of problems. Top on the list was a failure of leadership – from the White House, to the Department of Homeland Security, to FEMA, to some state and local officials.

To this day, DHS does not make sufficient distinction between problems that states must deal with on a seasonal basis and the larger catastrophes which, as Katrina demonstrated, quickly overwhelm local and state authorities. This legislation is an effort to get DHS to understand that distinction more fully and to target its preparedness and response systems to cope better with catastrophic disasters as well as normal disasters.

The Chairman has described the bill thoroughly, so I will touch on just a few points briefly. Our driving purpose here is to save lives in a catastrophe and ease the recovery for survivors. If lives are to be saved, first responders must have the tools they need to do so. Yet, too frequently police, fire fighters, and medical workers cannot share life-saving information at the scene of a disaster because their communications equipment is not compatible. During Hurricane Katrina, first responders not only lacked compatible radios, they lost communication completely when power lines and sub stations were knocked out of operation.

Senator Collins and I introduced a bill last year, and this Committee reported it out, to improve emergency communications. Our current

legislation draws liberally from it. We would bring cohesion to DHS's splintered communications efforts. We would require a national strategy for emergencies; establish a research and development program; and, most importantly, dedicate funding for state and local communications and interoperability grants, authorized at \$3.3 billion over five years.

This legislation also addresses inadequacies in emergency aid and recovery programs that we have learned about since Katrina. We would change the Stafford Act to require U.S. EMA to develop housing and recovery strategies; we would increase hazard mitigation assistance and allow U.S. EMA to provide not just temporary housing but permanent or semi-permanent housing as well, giving it greater flexibility to meet the needs of disaster victims in a more cost effective way.

We would abolish caps that limit specific assistance for repairs and home replacement and we would increase transportation benefits. We would reinforce Congress' intent to allow rental assistance to be used for utility costs. We would allow U.S. EMA to provide assistance to parts of a former household that necessarily splits following a disaster. And if the President finds "catastrophic damages" to a location, he would be able to double the

cap for individual assistance from \$26,000 to \$52,000 and provide help with mortgages, rental assistance, and other needs.

Other provisions in our bill call for increased planning for people with special needs, better ways to get disaster information to those who need it and measures to assist with family reunification. We would also require government contractors to hire more local firms and local workers.

This legislation also has an extensive section dedicated to saving money for the taxpayers while preventing waste, fraud, and abuse, which has been a vexing issue following Katrina. We would require the U.S. EMA to establish an identity verification process and we would competitively award contracts in advance for predictably required goods and services.

I regret we were not able to agree on a few items in this bill, and so I will offer two amendments that I will describe in more detail at the appropriate time. One would provide additional unemployment benefits to victims of a catastrophic disaster. The second would allow the President to apply the provisions of this bill retroactively to Katrina victims, many of

whom are still in great need. I fear that if we fail to do so, we will add insult to their injuries, since this bill was inspired by their suffering.

Finally, while I am pleased that this legislation takes the important step of authorizing additional funds for core FEMA accounts within U.S. EMA, I believe more may be necessary, and I will work towards that end as the new agency comes into being.

Madam Chairman, we are approaching the one year anniversary of Katrina – August 29. Yet, many victims of Katrina still face uncertain futures, and we have much more to do before our country is really prepared for the kind of natural disasters or terrorist attacks that threaten us. As we move this legislation forward, we must not forget the tragedy that made these important changes necessary. Let's remember that this legislation was inspired by those who endured Katrina so that others will not have to suffer as they have. Thank you.