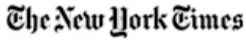



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EDUCATION
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Senate Panel Urge FEMA Dismantling

By [ERIC LIPTON](#)
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WASHINGTON, April 26 —The Federal Emergency Management Agency was so fundamentally dysfunctional during Hurricane Katrina that Congress should abolish it and create a new disaster response agency from scratch, according to a draft of bipartisan recommendations proposed by a Senate committee.

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And during major catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina, the agency's director would report directly to the president.

FEMA today has a budget of \$4.8 billion, and 2,600 full-time employees.

Senator [Susan Collins](#), the Maine Republican who is chairwoman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said the new agency would be "better equipped with the tools to prepare for and respond to a disaster."

The committee's ranking Democrat, Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#) of Connecticut, also endorsed creation of what would be called the National Preparedness and Response Authority. But the full committee has not yet debated or voted on the draft recommendations.

The report has also not yet been shared with the Bush administration. But officials at the Department of Homeland Security said that from what they had already heard, they were not impressed.

"It is time to stop rearranging organization charts and start focusing on how governments at all levels are preparing for the fast-approaching storm season," said Russ Knocke, the department press secretary.

Since Hurricane Katrina hit, Michael Chertoff, the secretary of homeland security, has been working on his own alternative to the agency's current structure, which he has described as "retooling" FEMA. That has meant bringing in professional disaster managers to replace the former director Michael D. Brown and other senior officials, many of whom had little emergency management experience.

Mr. Chertoff has also moved to fill hundreds of other vacant jobs, establish a better disaster-resistant communications system and set up a way to ensure that the agency can more rapidly deliver emergency supplies.

The proposal by the Senate committee leaders will join others now before Congress. Bills are pending that would keep FEMA intact, but remove it from the Homeland Security Department and have the director report directly to the president, as was the case before the department was created after the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Separately, Frances Fragos Townsend, the president's homeland security adviser, in a report released in February called for other agencies to pick up certain responsibilities now assigned to homeland security, like providing temporary housing to disaster victims.

Bruce Boughman, the director of emergency management for the state of Alabama and the president of the National Emergency Management Association, said that despite the bureaucratic-sounding nature of the Senate committee's draft recommendations, he believed they would create a more capable agency.

"Whatever the hell you call it, FEMA or National Preparedness and Response Authority, it does not matter," Mr. Boughman said. "But what this does is it ties all the pieces together."


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Mr. Lieberman, in a statement, said the Senate investigation, which was based on 22 hearings with testimony by 85 witnesses and the assembly of 830,000 pages of documents, reached the same conclusion as a separate House investigation: that the response to Hurricane Katrina was flawed at all levels of government.

"For years, government officials at all levels neglected their duties to prepare for a forewarned catastrophe," he said, adding, "These failures cost lives and multiplied the anguish of the storm's survivors."

The draft recommendations also call for the creation of "strike teams" that would be set up in 10 regional offices now run by FEMA that would be made up of disaster experts from the new national preparedness agency, as well as officials from the Defense Department and other federal agencies that would train together with local and state governments to prepare for a possible natural disaster or terrorist strike.

Ms. Collins and Mr. Lieberman, who in 2004 helped lead a similar restructuring of the management of the nation's intelligence agencies, said the recreated agency at homeland security would have the authority and resources needed to lead a response by the full federal government to a disaster, instead of seeing itself pushed to the side, as FEMA was after Hurricane Katrina.

FEMA was created in 1979 by President [Jimmy Carter](#) in an effort to better unify the nation's fragmented disaster response programs. Today, it is charged with providing food, water and cash aid to victims and then helping people figure out temporary living arrangements while they rebuild their homes.

It is also supposed to lead the recovery effort by helping state and local governments rebuild roads, bridges, hospitals and other government buildings, preferably in a way that makes the new neighborhoods less prone to similar disasters in the future.

In about 20,000 communities, FEMA also runs the federal government's flood insurance program, which is supposed to be self-sufficient, but which the government now must bail out because the claims from Hurricane Katrina are so enormous.

Mr. Lieberman, in remarks that have not been endorsed by Ms. Collins, said the investigation only further documented how the White House was not fully focused when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, with the president on vacation in Texas and traveling on the West Coast.

"Before landfall, the president should have returned to Washington, D.C., convened the cabinet, taken stock of the federal government's readiness for Katrina, made sure key White House staff were at their posts before landfall, and directly addressed the people of the Gulf Coast," Mr. Lieberman said in a statement.

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