



**Association of Contingency Planners (ACP)
Hurricane Katrina Observations**



NOAA via Getty Images

**Association of Contingency Planners
Observations of Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned
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The **Association of Contingency Planners (ACP)** is a non-profit trade association dedicated to fostering continued professional growth and development in effective Business Continuity and Continuity of Operations Planning. ACP is the recognized premier international networking and information exchange organization in the business continuity industry.

As practitioners and subject matter experts in the business continuity / continuity of operations profession, ACP members have a unique perspective on Hurricane Katrina. Considering that ACP is the largest networking organization of contingency planners, ACP polled their member's intellectual capital to gather observations of the preparation and response measures to this unprecedented catastrophe.

Identifying the lessons learned, whether in the public or private sector, enables the critical reevaluation of existing continuity plans to ensure the same mistakes are not made in the next disaster.

While it is easy to be the "arm chair quarterback" in this situation, the purpose of this document is not to critique certain organizations and individuals, but rather to share information on ways to mitigate losses, both business and personal, to respond better, quicker, faster and even to identify measures that might save lives.

While no one organization or individual can ever mitigate all the losses or fix every problem, ACP can document and share lessons learned, and provide solutions to minimize risk and potential negative impacts.



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Introduction ^[1]

Hurricane Katrina was the first Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. The storm made landfall as a Category 1 hurricane near Miami, Florida on August 25, 2005, then again as a Category 4 storm on August 29 along the Central Gulf Coast near New Orleans, Louisiana, Katrina resulted in breaches of the levee system that protected New Orleans from Lake Pontchartrain, and most of the city was subsequently flooded by the lake's waters. This and other major damage to the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama made Katrina the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States.

In Louisiana, the hurricane's eye made landfall at 6:10am CDT on Monday, August 29. After 11:00am CDT, several sections of the levee system in New Orleans collapsed. Mandatory evacuation of New Orleans had been ordered by the mayor before the hurricane struck, on August 28. The order was repeated on August 31. By early September, people were being evacuated, to neighboring states.

The federal government of the United States issued disaster declarations blanketing 90,000 square miles of the United States. The hurricane left an estimated five million people without power, with time estimates for total restoration exceeding two months. The official death toll has surpassed 1,200 and the damage estimates have surpassed \$200 billion. This tops Hurricane Andrew as the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history. Over a million people were displaced. Hurricane Katrina created a humanitarian crisis on a scale unseen in the history of the U.S.

¹ Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org)



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Lessons Learned

"In preparing for battle I have found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Dwight D. Eisenhower

The observations from Hurricane Katrina are almost too numerous to list and continue to grow as the recovery efforts evolve over time. Instead of trying to identify every specific, the information was condensed into five, very general, categories.

Most of this document's content has been gleaned from interpretations of the response at a local, state and federal level. In addition, being business continuity subject matter experts for companies directly impacted by this disaster, first-hand knowledge of their response as well as that of their vendors and business partners was identified.

1. There is no substitute for thorough preparation

In an industry devoted to preparation, this should go without saying. Yet, how many of the plans developed and implemented deal with emergency response and recovery? How much time has been spent working on evacuations and shelter-in-place procedures? What types of supplies are on-hand? When faced with evident threats, how quick are these steps put into play? Are these plans ever put into motion? How prepared are we as individuals? Do tight budgets come into the decision making process when deciding to evacuate? Here are some things to consider:

Command and Control can be argued as the single most important aspect of business continuity and disaster recovery. Never has this been so clearly demonstrated than it was with the apparent lack of coordination at all levels during the Hurricane Katrina event. The Command and Control Plan outlines the chains of command, identifies who the specific commanders are, as well as their backups, and how they can or cannot transfer that command, what are the specific roles & responsibilities, and should state that higher level executives should not be able to usurp authority from designated commanders. The commanders run the event, the executives run the business and there should be no interference. During Hurricane Katrina, the breakdown was between Local, State, and Federal commanders who did not want to relinquish control, the transfer of control is defined in the laws governing emergency situations in the State and Federal arenas and was not properly executed during the event.

Thorough Preparation Lesson 1 – Improve and enhance disaster preparation and crisis response plans through worst-case scenario testing and exercising.



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Thorough Preparation Lesson 2 – Clearly define your organization’s command and control organizational structure for emergencies. Include procedure for linking to local emergency management and response agencies.

Businesses need to take planning and preparation seriously prior to events such as Hurricane Katrina. Chains of command and decision-making can never break down under such circumstances and having a comprehensive and reliable document to turn to is essential. This makes promotion, education and testing important tools in the preparation process. Make sure decision-makers not only understand their role, but are properly versed in how to access and implement the plans that you’ve worked so diligently to complete.

Thorough Preparation Lesson 3 – Regularly exercise your command and control organization as part of a comprehensive business continuity and continuity of operations exercise strategy.

How well New Orleans and nearby areas did in preparing and evacuating their citizens remains to be seen and will continue to be a topic of debate. Leaders were too late in ordering a mandatory evacuation. Unfortunately, more could have been done to ensure those without the means had the resources to leave. Government agencies at all levels need to take a hard look at their emergency response procedures. Exactly who was in charge and who was responsible for making the tough decisions seemed unclear in the days prior to and immediately following the storm. Both local and state governments need to have a thorough understanding of the resources available to them. Additionally, leaders must learn how to marshal their forces when necessary and understand the most expedient ways to reach affected individuals. As with business continuity in the private sector, creating plans is only a small part of the process. Formal training and thorough simulations must play their part if we are to be adequately prepared. We must take the time to learn what the plans are for our own communities, including notification procedures, evacuation routes and local shelters.

The perception is many businesses did not take the time to put into play important steps to safeguard employees and clients, sometimes with the worst possible consequences. Despite the warning, many did not anticipate the widespread impact of the storm and subsequent flooding. This seriously impacted business and customers over a huge area and many companies are still struggling to restore service. It seems there is a natural hesitation to make decisions that may impact business or inconvenience employees, customers and stakeholders. Many could have done more, particularly in conveying the gravity of the situation to senior managers charged with dedicating resources to these issues.



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Thorough Preparation Lesson 4 – Responsible businesses should make responsible decisions for their employees even if government agencies do not provide guidance

- *Proactively monitor conditions*
- *Make decisions based on available information*
- *If a government agency, get involved in the dialogue through emergency management center if possible*
- *Communicate with local or state emergency management agencies during non-disaster times to self-educate on their disaster plans. Build business plans accordingly*

As proponents of preparedness, business continuity professionals are devoted to ensuring employers are prepared for the worst, but what about the personal preparation of the business continuity subject matter expert and their families? As professionals, there must be as much care readying their own homes as they do preparing their businesses and agencies. At a minimum, this means having emergency food and water as well as critical medications for at least three days. Just as training plays a vital role in the office, make sure family members are well versed in where supplies are and what the plan is if the professionals are not around.

Thorough Preparation Lesson 5 – Review employee education and family preparedness planning as part of BC plans. Improve and enhance where necessary.

As risks increase, it is appropriate to increase mitigations. In this case, federal transportation was appropriately moved out of the major threat zone. The failure was in not recognizing that the locally based transportation would not be sufficient should the threat turn into a disaster. Additional transportation, troops, and supplies should have been moved to nearby staging areas so that response could have been timelier. If the disaster had not occurred, send it home, be thankful that it was just a training exercise in mobilization, and complete a lessons learned on the mobilization efforts.

Thorough Preparation Lessons 6 & 7 –

- *Businesses in potential disaster areas should stage resources outside the 'danger zone'*
- *Consider likelihood of travel difficulties post disaster*



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It seems there was no contingency for police protection to maintain civil control. Obviously, the police officers of New Orleans, Gulfport, and Biloxi all had their hands full with their own families. Those men and women were put into an extreme position that is the nature of their highly stressful responsibilities as law enforcement. The positions of making a choice to help others as their sworn duties dictate or help their loved ones, drove some officers to deaths at their own hands. This situation has to be examined closely and the necessary training and counseling developed, as well as contingency plans to support the families of the critical emergency services personnel and first responders.

Thorough Preparation Lesson 8 – Plan for assisting families of mission critical employees.

2. Difficult decisions cannot be delayed

Accept Battlefield Promotions

Following 9/11:

"The official NYC recovery plan called for the Dept. of Sanitation to clean up after a building collapse. At the time of event, the Dept. of Design and Construction took charge of the effort because they could act decisively and without delay. In the first week of the effort, a mid-level official arrived on the scene and asked those who had taken charge of the operation "Who told you to get involved?" The response she received was, "We're kind of busy right now. Why don't you come back in six months and ask that question."

Following Katrina:

"While state, local, and other federal officials appeared not to fully comprehend the magnitude of the disaster at hand, the Coast Guard acted with the urgency the crisis demanded. Admiral Robert Duncan, head of the Eighth District in New Orleans, dispersed cutters, helicopters, and other vessels ahead of the storm. He also requested additional forces from the commander of the Coast Guard's Eastern Area, in Norfolk, Va."

"We don't have to get approval to execute," said Richard J. Dein, a retired Coast Guard commander and a search-and-rescue specialist. "The Coast Guard is organized by geography. All of those districts act autonomously. They each have a command and control center. What you had was a ready response network." "Lives were saved -- some 1,200, the Coast Guard estimated -- before FEMA's Brown arrived in Baton Rouge after the storm."

Difficult Decision Lesson 1 – Define command and control and give them authority to act.

