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Ill-prepared after disasters, government is learning from mistakes

Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives follows up on bishops' criticism that government response teams are ill prepared.

By Peggy DeKeyser, Pensacola

In the wake of a hurricane such as Katrina, government has an important function to play, emphasized Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Unfortunately, while people in the midst of a disaster are looking for hope and consolation, the government is not very good at giving them.

Towey's office stepped in to help when bishops in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina became frustrated with the federal government's response to storm recovery.

"We were looking to partner with faith-based groups and the response after the hurricane was just staggering — to see the heroic compassion that was expressed by so many groups, including so many groups within the Catholic community," Towey told *The Florida Catholic*.

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— **Jim Towey**

At the November meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Houston-Galveston, chairman of the task force on hurricane relief, leveled harsh criticism of the government's response to the hurricanes, saying in part, "It was clear to me that not a whole lot of help was coming from FEMA. ... The answers we were getting were not clear."

Towey's office was set up to handle situations such as these, he said. "We have tried to provide help in an extraordinary situation because we saw that things were falling through the cracks." He expressed his openness to hearing the criticism from Archbishop Fiorenza firsthand. "Anytime he wants to call with his concerns, I'm all ears."

Reflecting on his experience as head of health and rehabilitative services in Miami after Hurricane Andrew, Towey said, "No matter how well you plan, no matter how competent people are, when you have a catastrophe of a certain magnitude, you're going to have things fall through the cracks, so our effort is to try to bridge the gap."

Because people in the affected areas are still suffering, frustrations continue. Towey, focusing on the future, commented on the "lessons-learned" exercise currently under way at the White House, designed to improve future response to disasters.

"We're relaying to Fran Townsend, who is heading this up for the president, the experience of the faith-based communities and of some of the Catholic bishops and others who were frustrated and getting conflicting responses or no communication when there was dire need right after the storm," he said. "There will be efforts to learn from what took place in the wake of Katrina with respect to how the Catholic Church and others communicate their concerns and needs after a catastrophe."

School reconstruction is currently included in legislation to give hurricane-affected schools federal relief funds. When asked if Catholic schools will remain in the legislation, Towey responded, "You'll have to get someone from Congress to predict that one."

The importance of including all schools in the legislation is important to the president, Towey said. "The president believes that (vouchers are) the most prudent and the fairest way to go, because you have people that were scattered all over the country and school systems that were (affected) by this. The last thing you want to do is to send the message that schools in other communities shouldn't open their doors because they may get stiffed."

Catholics in Florida received praise from Towey for taking in evacuees from the 2005 storms. "Some people have forgotten the extraordinary response of faith-based communities in 2004, and in particular of the Catholic Church, after the string of hurricanes that hit Florida. And now to have yourselves not only hit again, but to face the role of providing shelter to so many thousands of evacuees from New Orleans, Mississippi and Alabama. It's extraordinary what God has asked of Florida."

Towey didn't flinch from the criticism that came from the bishops' task force. "There's no question that what Archbishop Fiorenza pointed out is true — that there were incidences of conflicting information or poorly communicated information or just lack of responsiveness and we've got to do a better job.

"What Archbishop Fiorenza said was fair game; he's being very fair and even-handed. I think Archbishop (Alfred C.) Hughes (of New Orleans) has been very fair and even-handed. I talked with Archbishop (John C.) Favalora (of Miami) because he's a New Orleans native, spent the first couple decades of his priesthood there. I think the church has been very constructive in its criticisms and has a right to feel we can do better. I think President Bush is committed to see that we do."

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, of Pensacola-Tallahassee, a member of the bishops' task force, said, "We're very hopeful that through this continuing dialogue with the administration and Congress, that we will be able to obtain significant help for — first of all — New Orleans, as the people there rebuild their lives and homes and the institutions of the Catholic Church which are so vital to their well-being. The schools, hospitals, parishes and

other Catholic service providers have always been an important part of the fabric of New Orleans. The victims of these hurricanes will continue to need support and, at this point, the federal government is the only entity that can provide support on the scale that it's needed."

Even with the efforts to learn from the mistakes of the past and do better in the future, Towey concluded, "That kind of a storm, you could have planned all you want to and it still would have been a catastrophe."

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