

James Lee Witt, Chairman and CEO
James Lee Witt Associates
Comments on California's Emergency Preparedness
As requested by the California Little Hoover Commission

First of all, I would like to thank the California Little Hoover Commission, both staff and the Commissioners, for giving me the opportunity to comment on the emergency preparedness and response capacity of a State that has one of the largest economies in the world. As one of the largest economies in the world, California has an even greater need to protect its citizens, assets and all other things that make the State a leader in not only the national, but the international marketplace.

As the Former Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from 1993 to 2001, I took great pride in making sure that the federal government did everything it can to make sure that State and local government did not fail when a disaster occurs. During my tenure, we made every effort to reach out to State and local government. We trained and exercised with them. We developed relationships across all levels of government so that in the event of a disaster, all those who played a part in the response and recovery effort were able to do so in a seamless fashion.

Since my tenure, FEMA has been folded into the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As the response to Hurricane Katrina has demonstrated, we as a nation are no longer as prepared as we could be in the face of catastrophe. Given all the finger-pointing and reports that have been issued since then, we now have a chance to build on that experience to better prepare and protect ourselves, not only in the event of a disaster, but of a true catastrophe.

In looking into California's level of preparedness for a catastrophic event, the Little Hoover Commission has asked for my comments on the following issues:

- *Assessing Hurricane Katrina Critical Challenges*
- *Building Leadership and Capacity for Catastrophic Events*
- *Integrating Military Capability into Emergency Response*
- *Developing Independent State Capability*

The importance of these issues to the overall framework to better prepare and protect California before and after a catastrophic event is, in fact, only a small part of what needs to take place. While I will provide some comments on the issues mentioned above, in order to properly and effectively look into California's true level of preparedness for a catastrophic event, a thorough and expert assessment into the State's preparedness and response capacity must take place. Without this assessment, the operational and administrative gaps that exist within California's capacity to effectively prepare for and respond to a catastrophic event will never be identified and corrected.

Assessing Hurricane Katrina Critical Challenges

Last month, the White House released a report titled "The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina- Lessons Learned". This report identified 17 specific lessons that the federal government has learned in responding to Hurricane Katrina. These critical challenges are:

1. *National Preparedness*
2. *Integrated Use of Military Capabilities*
3. *Communications*

4. *Logistics and Evacuations*
5. *Search and Rescue*
6. *Public Safety and Security*
7. *Public Health and Medical Support*
8. *Human Services*
9. *Mass Care and Housing*
10. *Public Communications*
11. *Critical Infrastructure and Impact Assessment*
12. *Environmental Hazards and Debris Removal*
13. *Foreign Assistance*
14. *Non-Governmental Aid*
15. *Training, Exercises and Lessons Learned*
16. *Homeland Security Professional Development and Education*
17. *Citizens and Community Preparedness*

Given the number of challenges encountered during the response to Hurricane Katrina, the need to prioritize reforms to these challenges, and that fact that all challenges are interdependent, in order ensure that both the State and federal governments are prepared for a catastrophic event, it is my opinion is that all reforms would be simultaneously made if one action, which has not been identified, was taken- that is to take FEMA out of DHS and re-establish it as a Cabinet-level, independent agency.

Many of the recommendations that are included in the White House report were actually in place prior to the establishment of DHS and the folding in of FEMA into DHS. In essence, by folding FEMA into DHS, an additional level of bureaucracy was created that impacted the ability of the federal government to make sure that local and State government had the tools

necessary to prepare for a catastrophic event. By re-establishing FEMA as an independent, Cabinet-level agency, State and local governments can have a direct link to train and exercise for catastrophe-based events while simultaneously re-building the critical relationships across all levels of government which will be necessary for effective response and recovery.

Building Leadership and Capacity for Catastrophic Events

During my eight years as Director of FEMA, we conducted all-hazards disaster response drills, training and exercises with local and State government and response agencies every year. We built relationships among all those who are involved in response and recovery aspects in one way or another. Even if it wasn't a time of crisis, I would pick up the phone and call a State Director of an Office of Emergency Services to ask if there is anything FEMA could do to help that State Office of Emergency Services better prepare itself and protect its citizens.

Again, I cannot emphasize enough the benefits of constant communication, drills, training and exercising among all levels of government and response agencies. Therefore, if I, as Director of FEMA, can pick-up the phone and contact my counterparts at the State level, State Directors should pick-up the phone and contact their counterparts on the local level to ask them what they can do to help better prepare and protect municipalities. This communication strategy builds the repertoire, trust and camaraderie that are essential components of successful decision making at the time of crisis.

Integrating Military Capability into Emergency Response

The U.S. Military plays a supporting role during federally-declared disaster response and recovery operations. When I was Director of FEMA, I always

had a representative from the Department of Defense at the table. The Department of Defense took part in all FEMA-related activities whether it was a disaster-related drill, exercise, training or actual response. I made sure that FEMA had the full support of the Department of Defense before disasters occurred. Additionally, when FEMA was a Cabinet-level agency, if I made a request to the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary knew that I was given full authority by the President. If that request wasn't filled, the Secretary would be getting a call from either the White House Chief of Staff or the President, which, for those reasons, was not a call that one would want to receive.

From drills, exercises and training to proper inclusion in response activities, the California National Guard plays a supportive and effective role in responding to emergency-related events. California has the largest State National Guard contingent in the United States. Therefore, I would make sure that the Adjutant General for the California National Guard, or his/her designee, be included in any and all aspects related to supporting the Governor's Office of Emergency Services and emergency response activities.

Developing Independent State Capability

When I was Director of FEMA, I made sure that my job was to ensure that State and local government did not fail at times of crisis. As I stated previously, FEMA engaged consistently with State and local government. Relationships continued to develop and enhance across all levels of government and response agencies. We identified assets, resources, programs and funding mechanisms that could be utilized pre-disaster in order to minimize the post-disaster impacts and challenges.

Therefore, California must take the initiative to ensure that State government, and specifically the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, does not allow local government to fail. From facilitating catastrophic planning initiatives and mitigation strategies and establishing pre-event contracts (contracts which are activated as a result of an event) to developing surge capacity among hospitals, shelters, and those response entities that would assist both the general and at-risk populations, California must develop response and recovery mechanisms to ensure that citizens are protected and essential services are ready to be provide to those who need them.

One way to fund the building of State capacity would be through Emergency Management Preparedness Grants (EMPG). However, the folding of FEMA under DHS, coupled with a focus on terrorism, severely impacted the various funding streams, such as EMPG, that would have gone to State and local government to prepare for all-hazards emergencies. Hence, another reason why FEMA needs to be taken out of DHS, so programs that assist State and local governments, can be fully-funded to enable them in building the appropriate level of capacity to respond and recover from catastrophic events.

By providing for and prioritizing resources for preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation activities and constant communication between State and local government through the Director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services and the Director's counterpart on the local level, California will be able to identify the local gaps and provide solutions on how the State can fill those gaps.