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HOSTING A DISASTER: TIPS FOR HOST CITIES

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While Hurricane Katrina focused state and local officials' attention on the importance of disaster preparedness, much less attention has been paid to best practices for "host cities" —the communities that house evacuees from areas affected by disaster. However, preparing to be home to perhaps hundreds of thousands of evacuees after a disaster, whether for days or months, helps ensure that both the host cities and their guests will handle the experience as well as possible.

During and after Katrina, hundreds of thousands of people from across Mississippi and Louisiana were displaced to all fifty states. Some communities, notably Houston, Atlanta, and Baton Rouge, took especially large numbers of evacuees. A year after Katrina, some 84,000 evacuees remained in the Atlanta area, 50,000 remained in Baton Rouge, and 150,000 remained in Houston.[1] Many of these evacuees have likely left their hometowns permanently.[2]

What was initially seen as a temporary evacuation has turned into a mass migration, illustrating the uncertainty affecting host cities. Because of this uncertainty, rigid top-down structures that are, by their nature, unable to adapt to the rapidly changing environment associated with a sudden influx of people are poorly suited to leading response. Rather, by preparing for a sudden influx of people, placing an emphasis on creating communities and resuming normalcy, and making clear commitments about what services the host city will provide and when, host cities and their guests will be best suited to adapt to changing circumstances.

PREPARATION

Policy makers must understand that the private sector—businesses and non-profit groups—plays a critical role in

both disaster preparedness and recovery. In providing refugee housing and temporary housing,[3] host cities should allow non-profit organizations, including religious groups as well as for-profit firms, to play significant roles in providing essential services like housing and health services, as they did after Katrina both in affected areas and host cities.[4]

Private response is simply more agile than government response after disasters.[5] Bearing this in mind, officials are well advised to consider what support the public sector can effectively provide, such as clear "rules of the game" and access to public facilities, versus what is better left to the private sector, such as providing most housing and social services. As Joel Kotkin points out, Houston's widely lauded post-Katrina response was "largely a joint effort of the city's African-American churches and its largely white evangelical congregations"—that is, private response.[6] While the City of Houston opened the Astrodome and George R. Brown Convention Center to evacuees, the experience of individuals in these temporary shelters demonstrates that closing these mega-shelters and allowing evacuees to move into private-sector housing—that is, getting people out of refugee housing and into temporary housing—must be a priority.[7]

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Because of the confusion inherent in a large influx of people, centralized authorities in the public sector are unlikely to identify effective temporary housing for guests. Many places such as church recreation halls or private homes may be unknown to policy makers. At the same time, some facilities such as abandoned or partially vacant public housing projects that may be known to policy makers may prove unsuitable for temporary housing. Placing guests in areas far away from public transportation, schools, stores, religious congregations, and entertainment facilities is deleterious to morale and community rebuilding. For this reason, it is best to allow a robust private response to housing needs. Networks within the private sector, such as interfaith groups, community coalitions, and business groups, should consider in advance the facilities they have to house guests in the event their communities become host cities.

It is important to note that no one person or committee chooses which cities will become host cities. To a large degree, selection results from thousands of individual decisions. Host cities tend to be mid- to large-size cities, as a large percentage of people fleeing any disaster are likely to wind up in a handful of larger cities. As a result, cities within this size range must be equipped to become host cities.

Policy makers cannot and should not try to subsume the resources, skills, and knowledge of the private sector into a unified city-wide response. Rather, they are best advised to understand broadly what the for- and non-profit firms in their communities are able to do if a nearby community is affected by a disaster, plan for how the public sector will respond, and ensure that the public sector plan is limited and understood by other sectors. This public sector plan should be largely constrained to assisting with refugee housing and providing financial assistance to victims through vouchers and cash that can be used in the private sector.

CREATING COMMUNITIES AND RESUMING NORMALCY

As we have previously documented, social capital and community ties have been critical instruments to the rebuilding of cities in Louisiana and Mississippi that were affected by Katrina.[8] The same principle applies to host cities: guests should be allowed to settle in a geographical manner conducive to reestablishing community links and the social capital networks that play such a critical role in addressing the challenges associated with evacuation and at least temporary resettlement. This requires a robust, creative response that draws extensively on the local knowledge and the flexibility of the private sector, with public assistance provided in cash or voucher form to the extent possible.

Direct assistance, such as housing or food provided by governments, limits the range of options available to guests and discourages creative, individually-tailored solutions to housing and other needs. Vouchers are preferable to direct assistance because they encourage more creative responses from the private and charitable sectors. Providers of services, from housing to transportation, will compete for the purchasing power that voucher recipients have, and can come up with more agile and creative ways to meet needs. In the case of a large disaster, vouchers will likely lead to private-sector firms in potential host cities competing to make themselves more attractive to guests. Vouchers turn recipients of public and charitable assistance into empowered, discriminating consumers rather than victims dependent on government agencies.

Host cities should consider that, despite likely geographical proximity to their guests' hometowns, their cultures, atti-

tudes, and expectations may be very different.[9] For instance, Katrina evacuees who ended up in Houston reported difficulty with transportation,[10] as New Orleans is a compact city with an extensive bus and streetcar network, while Houston is a city dominated by cars and highways.

Critically, cities should avoid any policy that makes top-down assessments about where to "put" people. Households and communities housed temporarily in the host city will have different assets and needs, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing for them. The resumption of social networks is vital: Despite reporting an overwhelmingly positive experience in Houston, Katrina evacuees cited separation from family and social networks as a key complaint.[11]

In order to encourage creative solutions to guests' temporary housing, health, and other needs, aid from the public sector should be given in cash or voucher form to the extent possible. Vouchers and cash allow for more personalized, flexible solutions and minimize bureaucratic uncertainty. Moreover, these vouchers and grants should not be geographically constrained but should be usable anywhere; for instance, evacuees may have social or family ties in other cities where they may wish to move instead. Aid that is geographically limited effectively penalizes people who wish to move elsewhere.[12]

To further reduce delays in disaster situations, voucher and cash aid should be provided without means testing and with minimal documentation, as guests are unlikely to have brought personal records, like tax returns or birth certificates, when they evacuated their homes. Fraudulent applications should be dealt with ex post through vigorous prosecution, rather than ex ante through excessively onerous documentation requirements. Speed of cash aid is particularly important as many guests are likely to be unbanked and therefore lack access to paycheck direct deposit or ATMs to withdraw savings.[13]

By allowing a robust private response, host cities ensure the flexibility that allows the communities that existed before the disaster to leverage their networks and social capital to make the best of their time away from their homes and to begin the rebuilding process as quickly and efficiently as possible. Additionally, empowering guest communities to leverage their capacities to address their own needs will likely lead to better outcomes than top-down planned solutions.

CREDIBILITY OF COMMITMENTS

The temptation for policy makers to promise more than they can deliver is strong even under the best of circumstances. In the aftermath of a disaster, when people are suffering from great loss and extensive human need is evident, it becomes even more enticing for public officials to make promises that exceed what they are able to deliver.

One of the strongest complaints from Hurricane Katrina's victims was (and continues to be) the inability of the federal, state, and local governments to follow through on commitments.[14] These broken promises have a deleterious effect not only on morale, but on the ability of people and communities to make rational decisions about how to best get on with their lives—a problem we label "signal noise," which is the persistent distortion of signals sent from and to civil society actors, making the underlying signal more difficult for people on the ground to read and interpret.[15] For this reason, it is critical that host cities avoid promising more than they can deliver in terms of housing and aid.

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Officials do far better to make relatively small promises and then deliver on them. This requires an honest analysis of capabilities before a city takes on post-disaster guests, room for the private sector to respond robustly, and a disciplined approach to response that does not over promise. Carefully considered, articulated, and critiqued small plans set in place before disasters are vastly preferable to plans made after disasters, which will inevitably be larger than what is possible to execute and therefore destined to fail. A key goal of any public plan should be a rapid handoff to the private sector where there is more room for creative and robust response to emergent needs.

CONCLUSION

When disasters strike, entire communities must quickly move en masse to nearby communities. The one certainty in this situation is uncertainty: Host cities do not know how long

their guests will stay, what particular needs they have, or how rebuilding and recovery in their hometowns will commence.

Potential host cities—which include virtually every city and town in the United States—can prepare for an influx of residents after a disaster by:

- Understanding the role of and implementing public policies that support the private sector in meeting critical needs
- Stressing robust, grassroots-driven, community-centered housing and assistance for guests
- Delineating what local government will do and carrying out commitments, while avoiding overpromising and thus adding to uncertainty

ENDNOTES

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