

***Marty McKellips – Testimony before Texas Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security -June 2010***

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this critical issue. My name is Marty McKellips, Chief Executive Officer for the American Red Cross of Central Texas Chapter and State Relations Representative on behalf of the American Red Cross for the State of Texas.

The American Red Cross was first chartered by the Congress of the United States in 1905. The Red Cross currently exists under a charter amended by several later Acts of Congress, most recently in 2007. Among the purposes of the Red Cross as stipulated in our Congressional Charter is... *"To continue and carry on a system of national and international relief in time of peace and apply the same in **mitigating** the suffering caused by pestilence, famine, fire, floods and other great national calamities, **and to devise and carry on measures for preventing the same.**"*

The mission of the American Red Cross is as follows: "the American Red Cross, a humanitarian organization led by volunteers and guided by its Congressional Charter and the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross Movement, will provide relief to victims of disaster and **help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies.**" Among the current goals of our organization is that "the American Red Cross will provide nationwide – **disaster planning, preparedness, response, community disaster education, and mitigation.**"

The Texas Chapters have been serving their communities since 1900. In the last 20 years we have improved our efficiencies by reducing the number of our administrative units (Chapters) by 90% while almost doubling services provided. Twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, Texans are being touched by Red Cross services. The Red Cross assists in every kind of disaster from single family fires to major hurricanes. Hundreds of thousands of Texans receive first aid training every year from their local Red Cross. Hundreds of times a day military families are connected by emergency communications facilitated by the American Red Cross. More than 90% of these services are provided by volunteers - neighbors helping neighbors.

In Texas the Red Cross has responded to innumerable disasters. During the Hurricane Season of 2008 for Hurricanes Dolly, Gustav, Ike and Tropical Storm Eduardo, the Red Cross sheltered over 60,000 Texas Residents and 25,000 from Louisiana who fled to Texas as a result of the storms. My organization has been one of many means by which families made victims by these events have begun to put their lives back together.

Thank you for allowing the Red Cross to make recommendations incorporating best practices and to address gaps in existing procedures for disaster preparations and response. The topics will include volunteer engagement, evacuation, sheltering, trauma and communications.

I would like to touch on four key areas related to responding to disasters in Texas specifically, geared towards large-scale evacuations during Hurricanes.

- **Shortage of facilities to shelter thousands in the event of a major hurricane.**

The solutions to this issue must take into account infrastructure needs, population densities, special needs requirements, cultural sensitivities, and potential dispersion of evacuees over great distances. Solutions must also clearly delineate roles across federal, state, and local government as well as NGOs. Currently, organizations and government agencies find themselves competing for limited shelter space due to a lack of coordination and differing abilities to compensate property owners.

Under the current system of school finance in Texas, schools are penalized if they dismiss classes in order to facilitate shelter operations. In some cases, this leads to people being forced to drive further or find other alternatives.

**The American Red Cross recommends that state law be amended to allow for the use of schools as shelters without penalty to the school district.**

- **Currently, the state employee disaster leave law permits state employees to volunteer time with the Red Cross during emergencies but this law does not apply to government employees at all levels.**

This is a best practice which is beneficial to disaster victims, voluntary agencies and state employees.

**The American Red Cross recommends that the Disaster Leave law be extended to all public employees at all levels of government.**

- **Currently the shelter selection site criterion in Texas is not standardized.**

Other Gulf States (FL and LA) have adopted the American Red Cross Shelter Selection Criteria (4496). This shelter selection criterion is based solely on the threat of rising water and potentially allows evacuees to be sheltered closer to home and reduces transportation difficulties. Simultaneously, it means all evacuees are sheltered under equal standards of safety.

**The recommendation of the American Red Cross is the adoption of the American Red Cross Shelter Selection Criteria (4496) which ensures every Texas citizen will be both safe and cared for in a similar manner.**

**The American Red Cross further recommends a unified shelter system across the state insuring that organizations are not competing for the same resources.**

- **Red Cross neutrality and shelter safety and security.**

In an evacuation scenario, some have placed great emphasis on knowing who every person is in every shelter. The American Red Cross believes it is our first responsibility

is to have a safe location for every person needing shelter regardless of race, nationality, gender, disability, religion and citizenship status.

Safety and security in emergency shelters are important issues. At the Red Cross, we work closely with local law enforcement and rely on their expertise and resources to address situations that may present risks to shelter occupants and communities. When our shelter staff has concerns that a particular shelter occupant may present risks to the safety of other shelter occupants, they contact the local police or sheriff's department and seek support and guidance.

The Red Cross, however, is not an arm of law enforcement. We are a non-profit, charitable organization, committed to providing services in an impartial manner to whoever needs it. Thus, during an evacuation and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, people with disaster-caused needs for food and shelter can get help from the Red Cross without undergoing a background check, establishing citizenship, or proving their identities.