

From Katrina to Coronavirus What Have We Learned?
by Leon McDougale, MD, MPH
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As I view the reaction to the novel coronavirus unfold in the United States, I'm reminded of lessons learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and how the failure of infrastructure (levees) resulted in more harm to the public than the initial damage caused by landfall of the hurricane.

Let's fast forward to 2019, just as the National Weather Service tracked the impending strike of Hurricane Katrina using satellite imagery, the National Intelligence Agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) were tracking the impending strike of novel coronavirus on the United States and the world.

Hurricane Katrina revealed cracks in the levees and the novel coronavirus has uncovered cracks in our public health infrastructure and national emergency management system. Tragically, in both emergencies, inadequate national response, coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), have been hallmarks.

FEMA's primary purpose is to coordinate response to disasters that overwhelm local and state resources. A state's governor must declare a state of emergency and formally make a request to the U.S. president that FEMA and the federal government respond to the disaster. Nearly every U.S. governor representing states and territories and the mayor of the District of Columbia have declared a state of emergency related to novel coronavirus.

Where is the U.S. Director of FEMA? Where is the Director of Homeland Security? What is the federal plan for response to local and state authorities being overwhelmed by novel coronavirus?

Another commonality between Hurricane Katrina and novel coronavirus is that the populations most affected in the United States are the, high density populations, or "inner cities" with higher percentages of people of color and the poor. The wake of flooding from the failed levees and in this case the failed federal response to novel coronavirus has placed lives at jeopardy and resulted in untimely deaths.

Do you remember the chaos during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where state troopers prevented citizens of New Orleans from crossing the bridge to a nearby parish in the name of safety and protecting that community? Fast forward to March 26, 2020

with Governors of Rhode Island, Kentucky, Florida and New Mexico having placed restrictions on travelers from Louisiana, New York, Colorado and other states requiring self-quarantines for 14 days and those persons who fail to self-quarantine facing the possibility of forced isolation or quarantine.

What says FEMA and Department of Homeland Security? Where are the novel coronavirus testing kits to enable data and reason to drive decision making? What's the national plan for mass production of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)? What's the national plan for ramping up ventilator production?

Lastly, with the national economy being placed at the epicenter of his public health crisis, it's an affront to the African American community and minority-owned businesses to learn that the United States Department of Labor has suspended Affirmative Action guidelines following passage of the largest stimulus package in U.S. history. Please contact your U.S. Congressional representatives, as I have, to inform them that this suspension must be rescinded. Small businesses are the engines of economic vitality within communities of color across the U.S.

I implore Chief Supply Chain officers within federal, state and local agencies, health systems and hospitals across the U.S. to maintain enactment of Affirmative Action guidelines.

In closing, I ask the question from Katrina to Coronavirus what have we learned?

Sincerely,

Leon McDougle, MD, MPH