

*Testimony of I.M. Shelton to the House
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on Oversight of the Federal Emergency
Management Agency's Response to the Baton Rouge Flood Disaster: Part II*

The City of Central, Louisiana is a 62 square mile municipality located 20 minutes north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The City of Central currently has a population of 27,947 people and 11,176 households.

On August 11th, 2016, a tropical weather system began that dropped more than 30 inches of rain in less than 72 hours on the City of Central, triggering a wide spread flooding event throughout the city and Southeast Louisiana. On August 14, 2016 the rivers that serve as the boundaries for the city rose to record breaking levels. The Amite River at Denahm Springs crested 46.20ft, breaking the record of 1983 by 5ft. The Comite River at Joor Rd crested 34.22ft, breaking the 2001 record by 4ft. An estimated 80% of the households and 10% of the businesses sustained damage from the flooding. The chance of a weather system such as this was less than 0.1%.

This 1000-year weather system dropped three times the amount of rain as Hurricane Katrina. This weather system caused the worst natural disaster that this community has ever witnessed.

However, the people of this community are resilient. Once the waters receded, people were working hard to remove all flood-damaged materials from their homes and preparing to rebuild. Within a week of the flood, citizens were ready to start the permitting and rebuilding process. As a government, we were ready to procure contracts for debris removal to clean our city.

We worked with both the Louisiana State Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) and the East Baton Rouge Parish's Mayor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (MOSHSEP) to address basic questions, but there are certain questions and decisions that only FEMA can answer. FEMA's response to this disaster has caused incredible frustration. As Mayor of Central, I had no liaison or point of contact for FEMA for the 21 days following the disaster. As a local municipality, we had no choice, but to establish plans for recovery efforts to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens without guidance or assistance from FEMA. The complexity of the rules and regulations for procurement wasted hours of precious time. We sorted through processes and worked with GOHSEP to gain clarity on what would be deemed as acceptable by FEMA in order to be reimbursed. The first few meetings that were hosted by MOHSEP for the mayors of the region were the only interaction with FEMA officials that our organization had during the first two weeks of this ordeal. However, those meetings still left us with confusion and unanswered questions. When contact was finally established with liaison for our city, she was still unable to answer any questions that we had or offer explanations and insight.

FEMA's response, or lack there of, has proven that the entity as a whole is inept, inconsistent, and disorganized. It was quickly apparent that the FEMA staff in our area had a lack of training and knowledge about the FEMA rules and regulations. The majority of the staff we have spoken to stated that they were brand new to the job with only 72 hours of training. Additionally, FEMA has a high turn over rate in the people on the ground. It has become common knowledge that your first interaction with a FEMA employee is more than likely to be your last with that same employee. In a disaster of this magnitude, it is important to establish consistent contacts and relationships as people are attempting to navigate the extremely complex FEMA process.

The entire business model of FEMA, in my opinion needs to be changed. It appears as though that model is currently: delay, deny and hopefully the applicant will tire and go away. Thus, the number of applicants will be reduced into what may be a manageable number. As an example, one of the first questions asked of an applicant is their living status. If they reply that they are living with in-laws, they are checked off as not needing housing assistance. Who in their right mind would think that is a permanent solution to housing? The applicant is not told this at the interview. For all they know, FEMA will call them back with an MHU or rental assistance. In addition to the weak questioning, those FEMA employees taking the applications are hardly trained and indeed have little or no regard to anything other than the black or white on the application form. Our city held a Town Hall meeting with FEMA reps who actually stated that FEMA would deny, but just appeal. He stated you may have to appeal two or three times, but keep appealing. DENY, DELAY AND HOPEFULLY THEY WILL GO AWAY.

FEMA is not set up to work with the municipalities. They work with states and counties, or in our case parishes, but the municipalities is where the real work is being done. In my city, every citizen has access to my cell phone number. That is impractical for a Parish President or the Governor. I am responsible for my citizens, they rely upon me to help them. They are going to reach out to me, and for me not to be able to give them answers, because I am shut out, is inexcusable. Yes, I said shut out. I was given several FEMA reps, but ultimately was told I would have to work with someone from the Governor's office, who did an excellent job, but we had to add another layer of red tape and channels. My first contact with FEMA in attempting to help my citizens was met with "privacy issues". It was only after I raised hell that I wouldn't know about their problems if they hadn't called me, did I get any information.

FEMA is overstuffed as an organization. It is my contention that it is so large, that it cannot react quick enough for emergencies. Never, was I given a chain of command of who to go to up the ladder to try to get things changed. I was told FEMA operates off laws, procedures, and policies. However, never, was I told what could be changed or why something couldn't be changed. This continues to this date in the request for payment on road damage that may not be visible but is certainly probable based on engineering studies.

Perhaps the the saddest and most disturbing event of the entire flood and recovery efforts, was the death of Mr. Everette Wilson. An elderly, blind gentleman whose MHU thermostat was not working properly and his heat went out of control and BAKED him to death inside his trailer in his sleep. This was reported to FEMA, but not one memo, email, caution, nothing was sent out to alert anyone that I know of, and certainly not to me about this. I understand not wanting to create a public panic, but to not share this information of a potential problem causing death is reprehensible. I only knew of it because one of our city councilmen is the Chief Investigator for the East Baton Rouge Parish Coroner's Office. FEMA was notified and a FEMA file number was issued on this incident. I have the FEMA representative's name to whom it was reported.

To the issue of MHU's. This program is almost impossible to implement. To place thousands of trailers, involves hundreds, if not thousand of employees, at a cost that is extravagant and totally inefficient. I believe the same as Congressman Graves, don't give trailers, give a check for half the overall cost of the trailers and you'll save money, folks will get further down the road to recovery and the efficiency of the program will be sped up. To those who say we can't give money instead of the trailers because of the oversight of handing out money, I say, that trailer represents a pile of money sitting in the yards. Are we

any less diligent in oversight of a material good costing twice the money we would give out in cash? The other program used in this disaster, "Shelter In Home", was a terrific idea in theory, but poor in practical application. The program called for \$15,000 per home to put the home in livable condition, not total, but livable condition. No one expected granite counter tops or luxurious bathrooms, but I do believe they thought they'd have more than a two by four for legs to a plastic utility sink for a kitchen. More money was probably spent on labor than on materials in this program. But again, a refining of this program, may make it beneficial in the future.

The people of my city and of Louisiana are a proud group of folks. I had many come to my office and cry with me over even having to ask for help. Imagine, you are 80 years old, and you lost everything to a flood. Not just your house, but EVERY possession you owned. Every photograph, every official document, every pot and pan. Despair runs rampant, hope is limited, darkness takes over. We are talking about lives of Americans.

For a nation to send billions of dollars overseas in federal aid, yet make its own citizens fight, plead, and beg for assistance is incomprehensible. FEMA does not act as an agency that is there in the midst of a disaster to help. FEMA seems to impede the progress of recovery at each and every step. Inconsistency, lack of flexibility, lack of compassion, and lack of knowledge is completely unacceptable for an organization of this nature.