

## Report: Nonprofits Need Government to Lead Gulf Coast Recovery

**The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy**

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While faith-based and secular nonprofits have contributed unprecedented efforts to the long-term recovery along the Gulf Coast over the last two years, their continuing work is ultimately no match for the breadth of devastation wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

For recovery to progress in a timely way, only government is large enough to take on the massive work still needed.

Those are among the conclusions of a report released October 15 by the [Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana](#) and the [Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government](#) (parent to the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy). "Response, Recovery, and the Role of the Nonprofit Community in the Two Years Since Katrina and Rita" is the fifth in a series of "GulfGov Reports" from those groups examining the aftermath of the storms on those regions.

"The nonprofit response has been impressive, but even with all of that, the scale of the devastation is so vast they can't overcome it all alone," said Karen Rowley, the report's principal author.

The conclusions stand in contrast to a new disaster preparedness policy released by the White House last week as part of its updated "[National Strategy for Homeland Security](#)." That report calls for the federal government to encourage citizens, the private sector, and faith-based and community groups to play a leading role in recovery efforts.

"Going forward, we must develop a comprehensive - but not bureaucratic or government-centric - framework wherein communities that are directly or indirectly affected by a large-scale disaster can flourish on a sustainable path to rebuilding and revitalization. This framework and accompanying plans must be closely guided by, and have at their core, the citizens, private sector, and faith-based and community organizations that are most severely and directly affected," the White House report states.

The newly release Bush administration strategy goes on further to state: "The majority of reconstruction efforts will occur beyond the Federal Government's purview. However, the Federal Government, in collaboration with all stakeholders, will draw upon and apply the field's most innovative thinking, lessons learned, and best practices to create a comprehensive framework for our Nation that fully appreciates free markets and the vast power of incentives and empowers individuals, businesses, and non-profit groups in the decisions about the future of their communities."

The federal government was widely criticized for the way it handled recovery efforts after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Reports from the White House itself, as well as from other public

and private institutions, pointed especially to a lack of communication and coordination of responsibilities within various levels of government and private and nonprofit groups.

Nonprofits, and especially faith-based organizations, on the other hand, have been widely recognized for filling in the gaps in hurricane response and recovery as needed. (For more on the role of faith-based organizations in disaster response, [click here for a Roundtable resource page](#).) The new GulfGov report is the most recent to highlight their ability to expand their social service work to meet overwhelming demands, and to continue doing so for the last two years. Disaster response became the largest component of [Lutheran Episcopal Services'](#) work in Mississippi after the storms, for instance, the report states. The faith-based organization now serves more than 850 families annually through that program, and also served thousands more with emergency assistance immediately after Hurricane Katrina.

According to GulfGov Reports, contributions to charities for Katrina relief and recovery efforts added up to about \$4.25 billion. In addition, 1.1 million volunteers have provided 14 million hours of service worth an estimated \$263 million, bringing the total donated for use by nonprofit organizations to about \$4.5 billion.

Yet as impressive as that figure is, it is less than 4 percent of the \$116 billion allocated by Congress for relief and recovery efforts.

"The scale of devastation is so vast in Louisiana and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast that only the government has the capacity to handle significant rebuilding," the GulfGov paper concludes. "The nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery - although the research indicates it seems to have taken the lead in areas like St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans, where the local governments are struggling. Rather it is to buttress the governmental response, to fill in the gaps left by government. For the recovery to proceed in a timely and substantial way, government must take the lead while the nonprofit, community-based, and faith-based organizations play a strong supporting role with their focus on the human element of the disaster."

Responding to the devastation of the 2005 hurricanes has prompted changes in the nonprofits themselves, according to GulfGov reports. Cooperation and collaboration among nonprofits have become commonplace and the groups have formed several new activist organizations to push for changes in government policy. Many nonprofits have developed disaster response and recovery plans that were non-existent before Katrina and Rita, and are considering improvements to communications, data security and other functions, the report states.

Funding, however, remains a significant concern, especially for smaller groups closest to the damage. Housing and coordinating volunteers who continue to be needed in the area is another ongoing issue, the report stated.