

**Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on Community
Based Organizations Response to the Gulf Coast Hurricanes
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Roundtable
March 7, 2006**

It's a privilege to be part of the roundtable discussion today. Hurricane Katrina changed the lives of thousands of Americans in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and we knew the enormity of the disaster would make the road to recovery long and difficult. You heard the call to action, and you responded with great skill and compassion. I commend you for all you've done so well and for all you continue to do each day.

More than 1,000 people lost their lives in the hurricanes, and over 700,000 people were affected. Families suddenly found themselves homeless, with only the clothes on their back and little hope for transportation, food and water. Many evacuees were minorities and some faced language barriers. Many of us visited the region and were horrified at the devastation of lives and communities.

Many of us hoped that if there was any ray of light, it was because the plight of the poor was so clear to all that it would shock the nation into action and end the silent slavery of poverty. But in the weeks since then, that hope was not fulfilled.

In a survey conducted by The Public Policy Research Lab in Louisiana, residents rated the response of religious and community-based organizations as highly effective, but government's response—at all levels—was rated much more negatively.

Americans know they have a role to play in looking out for each other. Everyone here saw the need and heard the pleas of the victims and immediately went to their assistance. Your role was particularly inspiring, when you yourselves and your organizations were also affected by the storms.

It's a wonderful country when citizens themselves respond like that. But we also have to wonder, what kind of country is it that relies solely on the caring of its people, while the government hides and fails to meet its own responsibility.

Personal responsibility, community responsibility, and government responsibility go hand in hand. When one of them breaks down, as it did in preparing, responding, and recovering from this disaster, we have to fix it.

The President's disaster plan calls on the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster to play a major role in response and recovery efforts. I'm interested in learning more about the good work you have done and how your organizations have met the needs of the hurricane victims.

We are also here to learn how your organizations worked together, and what federal, state, and local government should have done as well. You saw devastation and you rushed to the front lines, not because you were asked to, but because it's what you do—not just in times of emergency, but every day.

You're vital to the strength of the Gulf Coast communities you serve and you're essential in making them whole again.

Your experiences, recommendations, and guidance now can help us formulate more effective response to future crises, in which government meets its responsibility too.

Thank you again for joining us today, and I look forward to hearing from each of you.