

FEMA: NO SURPRISE, NO CONSENSUS

Throughout the interviews on Houston's response to Katrina, the interviewees discussed their varied opinions based on personal experiences with FEMA. Included are selections of statements by the interviewees that demonstrate the differing points of view on the topic.

REV. J. ERIC HYSTAD, *Houston's Second Baptist Church, "Operation Compassion"*:

I can't imagine the mandate and the workload that that group had. I am sure not defending FEMA because I know that they had some issues; but what I saw was they tried to do the best they could with limited resources, and it was very difficult. Whenever they ran into a problem, they tried to fix it. . . . even if it was wrong, [they] did try to fix it. . . . I saw people with great intentions trying to do the best they could. It is just sometimes when you are working with an organization like that, the red tape just kills you.

DR. KENNETH MATTOX, *Professor and Vice Chairman of Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine, Chief of Staff at Ben Taub Hospital*:

FEMA had no earthly idea of what our needs were or how to accomplish those needs. . . . We noticed, by the fourth day, the people even who had not had jobs, felt invigorated by what Houston had done and were reaching up with their hand and saying, this is like a religious revival experience. I want to be part of my future. But then, all of a sudden, they changed from their hand out for you to help lift them up, to a hand out to say

give me some money. . . . FEMA and the Red Cross were now handing out dollars, \$2,000 debit cards. . . . Did the people need \$2,000? No. They had three meals a day; they had a bed. We were trying to get them jobs. We were trying to get their kids in school. Mattress Mack [Jim McIngvale, owner of Gallery Furniture in Houston] was out offering them jobs. But when they were getting \$2,000 debit cards, they said, "You're going to give me money? I'll stay right here and get my next check." If you define a welfare state, . . . they created it.

FEMA . . . sailed [two cruise ships] to Galveston, then ordered us . . . to find 6,000 people to put on those cruise ships to unload the Astrodome. They didn't ask us, "Will these people go?" Put yourself in the position of our evacuees. These individuals were separated from their family and, by day four, were just beginning to find that their family was in Mississippi, and Amarillo, and Chicago. . . . Plus, some of them had been in the water for three days before they got over here. When we went to the floor of the Astrodome to say, "We need you to go down to Galveston to sit on a cruise ship in the middle of the water," they said, "No. I don't want to be in any more water the rest of my life."

Linda Jeffers, an evacuee from New Orleans, stated in an interview for Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston that she told officials in a meeting held at Reliant in early September that the evacuees needed money. Shortly after, FEMA began handing out the \$2,000 debit cards that became very controversial.

Photo courtesy of Mark Sloan.





This group of DMAT technicians from Colorado learned quickly to replace their FEMA shirts with their regular DMAT Colorado shirts.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.

MICHAEL MOORE, *Chief of Staff to Mayor Bill White:*

We first got a really small group of actual FEMA employees, and they put out the call, and this group from Colorado came out, EMS [and] medical technicians. They were great, but they were all wearing FEMA shirts. They took those FEMA shirts off so fast, and they wore their regular EMS [shirts] from Colorado. . . .

FEMA was like a book, and if it wasn't in the book you couldn't do it. . . .

If any disaster comes in, it's not the state, it's not the federal government, it is the locals here [who] are going to be the first responders . . . You've got to rely on yourself; and you have to be able to rely on the resources around you.

DR. DAVID PERSSE, *Director of Emergency Medical Services for the City of Houston:*

From my perspective, FEMA did a number of things right. They prepositioned a lot of resources, . . . It would have been much worse had they not done some of the smart things that they did for which they have gotten no credit. During Katrina, there were untold numbers of ambulances repositioned from across the country sent down to . . . get into New Orleans and help out after Katrina went through. Most people don't know that. The one place where they were prestaged was at Reliant Center. We wound up, during both Katrina and Rita, using those extremely effectively . . . Had they not been there, I don't know what we would have done. The Houston Fire Department ambulances were already taxed responding to the normal 9-1-1 calls . . . There is no way we could have taken the Houston Fire Department ambulances and sent them [to] evacuate nursing homes during Katrina. . . . I wound up benefiting from them thinking ahead.

There were DMAT teams—disaster medical assistance teams—which were prepositioned in anticipation of Katrina. . . . There was a place on Interstate 10 . . . where ambulances from Texas could get to and pick up patients, and turn around,

Dr. David Persse thinks FEMA got a bad wrap. FEMA sent helicopters, DMAT teams, and ambulances that helped with Houston's response to Katrina.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.

and bring them back. The Blackhawk helicopters were going into New Orleans, . . . landing on the overpass . . . offloading these patients to the DMAT [then] to triage, provide immediate care for, and stabilize them, . . . then put them in ambulances and drive them to Houston. Those helicopters? FEMA got them there. Those DMAT teams? FEMA got them there. Those ambulances? FEMA got them there . . . I came to rely heavily on what FEMA had done right.

JENNIFER POSTON, *Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, Manager of the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Response:*

FEMA had a target painted on its back, but if you trace back where a lot of this comes from, it is legislative. The American people need to go back and talk to their representatives about changing things like the Stafford Act. . . . [It] sets up the parameters that allow the federal government to turn on the faucet for assistance. It is an extremely huge, cantankerous document . . . that goes through everything in order for a town, a city, or a state to qualify for a disaster. . . . For example, . . . what FEMA qualifies as water damage to your home, is twenty-four inches of water. . . . If you have eighteen inches, your house does not fall in the parameters of being damaged . . . Those kinds of parameters within the Stafford Act . . . cheat a lot of people. 

