

## **U.S. DOT Report to Congress on Evaluation of Gulf Coast Communities' Catastrophic Evacuation Plans**

Subcommittee Members:

You may be aware that Under, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users of 2005 (SAFETEA-LU) and the DOT Fiscal Year 2006 appropriations bill, the Secretaries of Transportation and Homeland Security, in coordination with the Gulf Coast States and contiguous States, jointly reviewed and assessed Federal and State evacuation plans. The assessment included the costs associated with plan implementation for catastrophic events impacting the Gulf Coast Region. The Secretaries then reported their findings and recommendations to Congress.

The U.S. DOT Departmental Office of Civil Rights (DOCR) actively participated in the Department's review of Gulf Coast communities' catastrophic evacuation plans. The DOCR Director served on the management team that oversaw DOT's work on the plan assessments and I was a member of the evaluation team that handled the day-to-day work on this project. The primary purpose of our participation was to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are considered throughout the review. As a result of our involvement, evaluation criteria for the plan review incorporated disability specific considerations. Disability information is contained throughout the report findings and recommendations that were submitted to Congress as well as the President. The report contains substantial information on the unique needs of individuals with disabilities during an evacuation. There are several recommendations on how Federal, State, and local governments can better address the needs of this segment of the population during a catastrophic evacuation.

The report includes an examination of plans as they relate to people with disabilities. The findings indicate that the plans to include these individuals are under-developed and much work still needs to be done. Hospitals, nursing homes, and other institutions generally are responsible for developing their own evacuation plans and deciding when to evacuate their residents. One challenge is whether the risks of not evacuating outweigh the risks of moving seriously ill individuals. Individuals with disabilities who do not live in institutions pose other challenges. Locating where these individuals live is often difficult, despite attempts by local agencies to maintain lists of persons with various disabilities. Privacy interests and some individuals' reluctance to identify themselves as needing assistance are cited as considerations that must be addressed in establishing a comprehensive registry. Also, providing services for people who use wheelchairs, those who rely on medical equipment, those with hearing or visual impairments, the elderly, and other groups in the course of a mass evacuation presents particular obstacles. According to the report, provisions to meet transportation and sheltering requirements of these various "special needs" groups must be improved upon in most evacuation plans.

The report also includes recommendations to improve most evacuation plans as they relate to people with disabilities. Suggestions outlined in the report include:

Developing regional mass evacuation plans with representatives of various special needs populations as well as other groups involved in the planning process;

Transportation agencies and operators should be more directly involved in key aspects of evacuation planning and implementation--failure to include these agencies often results in inefficiencies and delays in transporting people with disabilities and other special needs; and

State and local agencies should work with the disability community to develop systems whereby those requiring accessible transportation or sheltering services during evacuations can identify such needs to emergency managers and operators of transportation and sheltering services prior to an evacuation.

The full report can be accessed through this link:  
[www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/hurricanevacuation](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/hurricanevacuation)

Should you have any questions on this matter, please don't hesitate to contact me.

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