



Disaster Accountability Project

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Barack Obama
The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

W. Craig Fugate
Administrator
FEMA
500 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20472

Marcie Roth
Director
Office of Disability Integration and
Coordination
FEMA
500 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20472

April 28, 2011

Dear Mr. President, Mr. Fugate, and Ms. Roth:

April has brought devastating tornados to at least half-a-dozen states from Oklahoma to New York. The most recent tornados in Alabama and Georgia revealed avoidable failures and gaps in regional emergency preparedness systems that almost certainly resulted in deaths. Some of these deaths were likely preventable.

Even as the victims of these tornados are buried and communities grieve, we must work to ensure that these vulnerable communities are protected before the next weather system arrives.

As the tornados were bearing down on Tuscaloosa, AL TV 33/40 reported that the entire weather siren system in Tuscaloosa AL had been knocked out.

Just a couple months ago, we watched as other critical power systems failed after Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami.

Memorial Hospital suffered its tragedy during Hurricane Katrina after critical backup power systems flooded, on the ground floor.

After 2008's Hurricane Ike in Texas, the public lacked information about where to go to access shelters and other mass care services.

As Tuscaloosa and other severely damaged jurisdictions rebuild, new sirens and warnings systems should be considered. The ability of these warnings systems to withstand power failure is critical **and we must be ready for more tornados now.**

Action Items

1) I am writing to request that the White House, FEMA, Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies immediately deploy any/all available federal assets to address these faulty warning systems. A combination of short, medium, and long-term reforms are needed to ensure Americans have fully functional and power-failure resistant warning systems.

2) Further, I am requesting the White House convene a multi-agency and multi-state meeting on emergency alert and warning systems that engages all stake-holders from tsunami vulnerable Western states to fire/hurricane affected Texas, to tornado vulnerable states hit this week.

The convening should include discussion of:

- Back-up power and storm resilient siren/warning systems.
- Alert systems for individuals with disabilities and other access and functional needs. This year, the State of Texas suspended its DeafLink program that ensures accessible warnings for deaf individuals across the state. Imagine having no siren at all.
- Pros/cons of siren and alert uniformity. Some neighboring counties have different sirens that can lead to confusion for people living near county borders.

While some alert and warning systems may take months to implement, there are things that must be done now to prevent additional loss of life from natural hazards, especially when we have advance warning and time to prepare.

Sincerely,



Ben Smilowitz
Executive Director

The President's Federal Disaster Declaration can be read to authorize federal assistance with tornado sirens and alert systems in Alabama:

“To provide appropriate assistance for required emergency measures, authorized under Title V of the Stafford Act, to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, and to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in all 67 counties in the State of Alabama.”