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**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH C. BECKER
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AMERICAN RED CROSS**

Chairman Thompson, Congressman King, and Members of the Committee on Homeland Security, thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify before you today on this important topic: Hurricane Season 2007. I am pleased to inform the Committee that we have made substantial improvements in our capacity to respond to the challenges that may come our way.

I would like to start by recognizing the selection of Mark W. Everson as the next president and chief executive officer of the American Red Cross. Many of you know Mr. Everson, who has led the Internal Revenue Service for the past four years. We at the American Red Cross are excited and encouraged about his selection and look forward to him officially joining the organization on May 29.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank each of you for your support of H.R. 1681, *the American National Red Cross Governance Modernization Act of 2007*, which was signed into law by President Bush on May 11. This legislation modernizes the governance structure of the American Red Cross and enhances the Red Cross Board of Governors' ability to support the critical mission of the Red Cross in the 21st century.

In today's testimony, I will focus on the significant improvements made by the American Red Cross since Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma devastated the Gulf Coast during the 2005 hurricane season. I will also address recent changes to the National Response Plan (NRP), in which the American Red Cross plays a significant role.

About the American Red Cross

For more than 125 years, the American Red Cross has been our nation's partner in preventing, preparing for, and responding to disasters. Our past and present Congressional Charter mandates

that the Red Cross “maintain a domestic and international system of disaster relief.” In fact, the Red Cross responds to more than 70,000 disasters each year, ranging from single family home fires to large scale hurricanes and tornadoes. In addition to family home fires and small scale events, today the Red Cross has 39 large scale disaster operations in 26 states and the Northern Mariana Islands, including the tornado that struck Kansas earlier this month and our continuing work to support the tragedy at Virginia Tech.

The Red Cross must function at many levels and across multiple jurisdictions. It is simultaneously a local responder, a state partner and a national organization. At the local level, we provide immediate services: food, shelter, immediate and longer-term assistance, for people in all disasters ranging from home fires to large scale disasters.

While the American Red Cross is the nation’s largest mass care provider, we are not the only mass care provider. As an independent, nonprofit organization, we rely on the generosity of the American people to provide services to victims of disasters. We also rely on our partners, such as the Southern Baptists, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and the United Way, to provide their services in larger events. Since Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross has reached out to hundreds of organizations across the nation to ensure our partnerships are solid, to find mutual ways of providing services during times of disasters, and to ensure that the gaps that existed in our response to Katrina are filled.

Hurricane Katrina

In August 2005, our nation awoke to the inconceivable wrath that was Hurricane Katrina. Millions of people were immediately displaced. The sheer magnitude of Katrina’s impact was unprecedented, and the American Red Cross, along with all other response and human services organizations, was not prepared for the magnitude of the response required by such a disaster. In our planning, we failed to “think big” enough.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the largest domestic events the Red Cross ever responded to were the 2004 hurricanes – Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne – which crisscrossed their way across the southeast. Our response to these storms easily surpassed anything done in prior disasters, such as Hurricane Andrew in 1992. After those storms, we made significant strides to increase our feeding, sheltering, and emergency assistance capacity.

Before Katrina made landfall, we enhanced local Red Cross chapter capacity with supplies, emergency response vehicles (ERVs), kitchens, communications equipment, and a first wave of almost two thousand additional volunteers – a force that would ultimately grow to 240,000 workers. But, for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, this was not enough. The 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes were 20 times larger than our previous largest disaster.

To say that the organization was stretched beyond capacity is an understatement. Some shelters became exceptionally crowded, we were slow to reach some rural areas, and when we gave emergency financial assistance our systems became overwhelmed. We responded by creating new systems utilizing our relationships with some of the best and brightest in corporate America to give aid to people in need. We also ramped up our workforce and trained tens of thousands of spontaneous volunteers who stepped up to help their neighbors.

It was not perfect – it was far from perfect – but we were successful, with the help of our partners, in getting the critical emergency aid to those who had nothing else on a scale that was unprecedented.

Hurricane Katrina exposed systemic vulnerabilities for the Red Cross and governmental agencies that respond to disasters. Yet, by bringing them to light, we were given the opportunity to identify them, fix them, and ensure that we are prepared for future disasters that may lie ahead.

Lessons Learned and Improvements, 2005-2007

Mr. Chairman, I shared lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina in preparation for the 2006 hurricane season with this Committee last June. While we were fortunate as a nation to have a relatively quiet hurricane season last year, that did not give the Red Cross reason to delay our progress, it simply gave us time to do more – time to ensure that we rebuilt our systems right, and to create the necessary capacity.

Today, I welcome the opportunity to address two specific issues that might have characterized the Red Cross in years past. The first is a cultural issue, the second is capacity.

First our culture. The Red Cross had a history of acting as an insular organization too many times and in too many places. As the nation's largest mass care provider, we have been successful in responding to disasters for more than a century. On larger relief efforts, we have worked with key partners over the years, typically faith based groups like the Southern Baptists and the Salvation Army. In very large events, like Katrina, many new groups step forward, especially the faith community. Our ability to work with these non-traditional disaster response organizations was limited. While overwhelmed providing service, we had difficulty helping them become part of the community response. This was a hard, but valuable lesson for the Red Cross to learn. In very, very large events, non disaster groups and new partners come forward to serve – and the Red Cross can take a lead role in helping them become part of the response.

Katrina also was a wake up call for the Red Cross that partnering in fact is important in all disasters – small and medium ones, not just the catastrophes. Since Katrina, the Red Cross at the national level and our more than 700 chapters nationwide have worked diligently to create and foster strong partnerships with many new organizations that would typically not be in the disaster response business. From faith groups and businesses to local civic organizations, our chapters have been working with local community organizations to ensure that partnerships are in place so that organizations – that selflessly step up to help their neighbors – know in advance how to access supplies, resources, and expertise. Through partnerships, Red Cross chapters are providing training and supplies to community-based organizations to strengthen response efforts across the nation. If and when a disaster strikes, these community-based organizations will be better prepared to assist in their response efforts, and the Red Cross will be better prepared to identify and reach out to people that may need assistance. We have seen the benefit of working with these new partners in many significant responses over the last year. The Red Cross does not think or act alone ... our commitment to partnerships is here to stay.

The second area is capacity. The Red Cross has significantly increased the investment in our capacity to respond. Today, we have six million pre-packaged meals at the ready, and sheltering supplies, like blankets, cots, toiletry kits, and clean up kits for up to a half million people are stored in warehouses spread along the coasts and in other high risk areas.

For many years we had mobile communications vehicles, complete with interoperable satellite and redundant communications that we would roll in ahead of a storm. Today we have 21 cities stocked with permanent satellite equipment along the Gulf Coast, and are working to add more.

We have worked even more effectively with the state and federal governments as well, hiring full-time Red Cross employees for 14 state emergency management offices, and for each of the FEMA regions. This is in addition to the employees we have added to work with NGO partner groups to help coordinate relief efforts. We have trained more than 165 government relations volunteers and have worked hard to strengthen our relationship with FEMA, clarifying and redefining roles and responsibilities. We have increased our efforts to work with and accommodate people with disabilities and continue to seek appropriate community partnerships to help us serve other vulnerable communities. We have changed our information sharing policies to allow transparency with other organizations and local law enforcement while respecting client confidentiality.

We also have added the following capacity:

- A web-based shelter management application developed in conjunction with FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security. This system has the ability to track shelter inventory, facility survey data, and population counts of the shelter population nationwide. Data on our 44,000 shelters is entered in the system.
- Improvements to the Disaster Services Human Resources (DSHR) system to track in real-time staff assigned to relief operations and strengthen the process used for registering spontaneous volunteers. The DSHR system software has also been modified to accommodate DSHR ID Smart Card technology. These improvements provide better information about our volunteers, their skills and availability.
- Addition of six on-staff disaster relief operation directors to provide leadership to major relief operations as well as mentor and coach chapter and multi-chapter relief operation directors. This will improve the skill sets of administrators and managers in the DSHR system.
- Development of national partnerships that chapters can utilize at the local level to engage underserved groups in their communities.
- A “Disaster Welfare Information” system for chapters to provide “safe and well” status information to the families and loved ones of disaster victims.
- Response Center Network expansion for a group of chapters that staff the 1-866-GET-INFO line. We have 250 simultaneous workers in chapters nationwide supporting the information center’s work.
- An enhanced Volunteer Match Portal to help manage expectations of large numbers of spontaneous volunteers and provide updated guidance.

All of this was completed by the beginning of the 2006 hurricane season. Since last fall, we have worked to sharpen our planning, starting with the six of the highest disaster-risk regions of the country. Working with partner organizations, state and local governments, and our federal

partners, we have tried to quantify the worst case catastrophic scenarios: (1) a hurricane hitting New York City; (2) a terrorist incident in Washington, D.C.; (3) a hurricane on the Carolina coast; (4) multiple hurricane strikes in the Gulf Coast; (5) an earthquake in southern California; and (6) an earthquake in northern California. Taking these scenarios, we are asking real-world questions. How many would need shelter and are we prepared to shelter this many people? How many would need to be fed? How many would need to be cared for? These numbers are daunting, Mr. Chairman, and the Red Cross – and the country – have many challenges to be prepared to respond.

Changes to the National Response Plan

As you know, the American Red Cross role in the National Response Plan (NRP) is evolving. This is the result of an expansion of responsibilities in Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6 (ESF6) and a change in the expectations of the role of the Primary Agency.

Historically, the Red Cross role in the National Response Plan (and its predecessor, the Federal Response Plan) has been the primary agency for mass care, and as a support agency for six other functions. In the primary role, the Red Cross has:

- Received, evaluated and forwarded State requests for mass care related support to FEMA for approval and fulfillment by the federal government in time of disaster;
- Assisted in federal planning efforts;
- Participated in federal level planning for mass care; and
- Provided liaisons to FEMA locations in support of ESF6 Mass Care activities.

Three years ago when the NRP was created, the American Red Cross assumed the role of the only nongovernmental organization named as a "primary agency" in an Emergency Support Function. We were very proud of this important role and approached it with the care and consideration necessary to serve in this function. Nevertheless, over the years, one of the lessons we learned is that this "primary agency" role was never fully understood, and for good reason. The American Red Cross is not a government agency, and we do not have, nor have we ever requested, the federal authority or ability to assign federal assets during times of disaster.

Additionally, our operation as a mass care sheltering service provider is separate and distinct from our role in the NRP. We have a separate Red Cross NRP team that supports the federal structure in disaster. This team receives requests from states for mass care (feeding and sheltering) and helps the federal agencies determine how to best fill the requests. This team is very different from our service provider team operating on the ground running Red Cross shelters and feeding clients – the Red Cross NRP team does not direct sheltering or other mass care services.

In the new NRP, currently being rewritten, the confusion regarding the Red Cross roles as a federal surrogate and a NGO mass care services provider is eliminated. It is imperative that the primary agency in the ESF needs to the authority to make quick and decisive commitments of federal assets. As I stated above, the Red Cross is not a federal agency, and does not have the authority to require or commit the federal resources of several cabinet agencies. The Red Cross is very pleased with the redesign of the NRP and its designation as a support agency.

For these reasons, and because of the expanded ESF6 role in the post-Katrina reforms implemented in the FY 2007 DHS Appropriations bill, the American Red Cross and FEMA have concurred that it is imperative that it is much more appropriate for FEMA to perform the federal role of “primary agency.” The Red Cross will become a "support agency" under ESF6, and our support role for the other six emergency support functions will continue unchanged. We participated significantly in rewriting the NRP along with FEMA and other federal agencies. In the end, we believe it is in the best interest of the American people for FEMA to perform the federal government’s role as the Primary Agency for all areas of ESF6. It has the needed federal statutory authority to commit federal resources of other federal agencies and to ensure a unified command structure during operational response.

While our “NRP status” has changed, our operations – as a service provider – have not. The American Red Cross and our partners, regardless of our role in the NRP, will continue to provide shelter, feeding, bulk distribution, welfare inquiry, recovery planning, emergency assistance, health and mental health assistance, and long term recovery.

Hurricane Season 2007

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, I have outlined the steps the Red Cross has taken to prepare for Hurricane Season 2007. We have made immense strides in our supplies, plans, systems, and culture. We have learned that what was “unimaginable” can, in fact, become reality.

While we have made significant improvements, the fact is that we – and federal government agencies – can never be ready enough.

There are significant national issues that still exist. The NRP is not complete. While we applaud the work that FEMA, DHS and all the contributors have done on the NRP, we need to have an operational plan complete.

We also need to see significant improvement in the areas of community and personal preparedness. The greatest defense to surviving a disaster is being prepared. The American Red Cross works with individuals, communities, states and the federal government to help our nation and our citizens become prepared for any disaster that comes their way. Red Cross programs are configured to disaster risk, that is, we design programs for individuals and families to prepare for natural disasters that are conducive to their geographic areas. As we rely on the neighbor helping neighbor philosophy, we encourage local communities to become more aware of potential hazards that could adversely impact their regions and prepare accordingly.

The Red Cross firmly believes in the importance of preparedness and has developed numerous tools and resources offered in a number of different languages to help families prepare for any unexpected disasters, from a house fire to a hurricane.

Over the past several years, organizations that help to prepare communities, as well as local, state and federal governments, have made efforts to streamline our messages on preparedness. We know that a single national message helps individuals better understand what they need to do to

protect themselves and their loved ones during times of disaster. It is important that all levels of government and the Red Cross convey a unified message to the public on preparedness.

We encourage families and individuals across this country to “Be Red Cross Ready.” Our campaign, which parallels the Department of Homeland Security’s Ready Campaign, provides tools for individual households to take three important steps: (1) Get a Kit; (2) Make a Plan; and (3) Be Informed.

Get a Kit – Every household should have prepared and ready to go a disaster kit that includes enough food and supplies to last each family member for three days. This could be an old knapsack or backpack with water, basic first aid supplies, any critical documents (such as photocopies of driver’s licenses), necessary medicines, a change of clothes, and a small amount of cash. This kit should be replenished as necessary to ensure that food, water, and medicines are fresh. This should be the one thing that anyone needing to leave in a hurry can grab to take with them. In addition, families should consider any special needs, including those of loved ones as well as their family pets.

Make a Plan – This plan should incorporate such things as where an individual and their loved ones would go in the event of a disaster, how they would communicate with a friend or loved one to let someone know where they are and that they are safe, particularly when critical infrastructure like phone lines are down. A good family plan also considers the care of pets.

Be Informed – Get information from either your local Red Cross chapter or another organization that offers critical trainings on making a disaster plan, a communications plan, and first aid/CPR. Knowing what to do during a time of disaster is critical to ensuring one’s safety and the safety of their loved ones.

Despite our collective efforts, there has not been a significant improvement in preparedness by individual households. We believe that Members of Congress could have an impact on this by addressing their constituents on preparedness issues, and partnering with organizations that promote disaster preparedness.

While we speak today of the upcoming hurricane season, other threats loom. One threat that continues to merit careful planning and attention is the potential pandemic influenza. In this regard, I come today with a specific request. While the Red Cross will be sharing vital family care information, providing a safe and adequate blood supply, and helping to meet the needs of isolated or quarantined people, we all know that our medical facilities will be overwhelmed. The medical community will turn to the Red Cross and other organizations for volunteers to help in overflow facilities. There is great risk in asking for volunteers to serve in support roles for those providing medical care, particularly in temporary facilities full of contagious people.

Our efforts on behalf of the Red Cross and other volunteers throughout the United States, their families and organizations to extend federal protections to them have been met with no success to date. We need strong health care protections for our volunteers, either through appropriate amendments to the Federal Volunteer Protection Act or new legislation that affords liability and benefits protections to volunteers who are placed in harms way. We ask your help here.

America will need volunteers to help in medical situations. I encourage this Congress to act while we still have time.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Congressman King, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on Red Cross improvements leading up to the 2007 hurricane season. We want to assure you, and the American people, that you can rely on the American Red Cross to be there whenever, wherever disaster strikes.

I am happy to address any questions you may have.

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