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## **NMA Calls Response to Hurricane Katrina a “National Disgrace”**

Washington, DC, September 8, 2005...The National Medical Association (NMA) today called the initial response to the Hurricane Katrina crisis a “national disgrace.” NMA leaders called on President George Bush and Congress to immediately lay the ground-work for a thorough and independent investigation.

Hurricane Katrina and its furious floodwaters laid waste to New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, destroying the livelihoods of a population that is two-thirds African American and nearly 30% poor.

“The initial federal response was stunningly neglectful,” said Sandra L. Gadson, M.D., president of the National Medical Association. “The reckless handling of this human catastrophe, at the outset, showed that the racial disparities we see in healthcare also exist at other critical levels of the nation’s health system, including disaster services.”

Dr. Gadson said that NMA leaders and members are “deeply troubled by the lack of forethought that went into protecting the health of highly vulnerable populations.”

NMA leaders said that although reliable figures on the loss of life are still unavailable, it is certain that the death toll could have been drastically reduced if the federal government had shown greater urgency in the critical days leading to the storm’s anticipated arrival.

“Both the physical and psychological impact of this tragedy is simply unimaginable and will require all hands on deck for months if not years to come,” said Dr. Gadson.

The frightful impact of Hurricane Katrina was brought to life in a recent letter to the NMA from Rahn K. Bailey, M.D., a psychiatrist working with hurricane evacuees at the Houston Astrodome:

“My first patient was an African American woman who cried uncontrollably the whole night. I did my best to sedate her, but within an hour she was crying the whole night. Her story was about her lost 13-year old daughter who she held onto as the waters kept rising in their home. When they managed to climb out of the house, her daughter, along with other family members, floated away in the raging waters and were lost in the night.”

Dr. Gadson said that although the primary focus must continue to be on-the-ground efforts to save lives and provide relief for victims, the federal government must act now to set the wheels in motion for an independent investigation.

Dr. Gadson said that not only was the hurricane on the national radar, but earlier warning signs that a hurricane strike in New Orleans would unleash deadly floodwaters with dire consequences for the poorest communities had long appeared in leading environmental journals and even in a 2004 *National Geographic* article.

The performance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was “deeply problematic,” said Dr. Gadson, noting that state and local officials have repeatedly indicated that FEMA inappropriately obstructed the delivery of emergency supplies to impacted sites. One report indicated that FEMA sent away three Walmart trailer trucks loaded with water.

NMA leaders noted with appreciation that both liberal and conservative leaders have strongly criticized the federal response. “The people of the Gulf Coast were struck by two disasters,” said Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca), “first the Hurricane, and then the failure of the federal government in their time of great need.”

“As a test of the homeland security system, this was a failure,” said former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich; while Senator Susan Collins (R-Me), chair of the Homeland Security Committee, has called the federal response “woefully inadequate.”

“In many ways, this is Public Health 101,” said Dr. Gadson. “In a natural disaster, those who have the least always stand to lose the most — including their lives. The decision-makers at the top were clearly culturally insensitive to the socio-economics of the region, particularly New Orleans.”

NMA leaders said that Congress would do well to consider this lesson as they face off on standing proposals to cut \$200 billion over the next five years from key health and social programs including housing, cash assistance to the poor, and \$10 billion in Medicaid, in addition to the \$100 billion tax cut proposals benefiting the wealthy.

“In African American communities, the word ‘Katrina’ may take on the power of the term ‘Tuskegee experiment’, said Gadson, “and become the new synonym for neglect of African Americans.”

Dr. Gadson further noted, “Distrust in the health system does not bode well for minority health care and is one of the factors highlighted in the 2003 Institute of Medicine report on health disparities.”

Perhaps the greatest lesson, said Dr. Gadson, is that this federal response reveals more than just poor planning. It reveals continuing fault lines in how the nation responds to the health and well being of its minority citizens.

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*The National Medical Association is the oldest and largest organization representing the interest of more than 30,000 African American physicians. The NMA was founded in 1895.*