



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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The Role of States and Governments in Natural Disasters | OAS Episode 18 | Sept. 28, 2017

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Our topic today is natural disasters and how governments at the federal, state and local level respond to those events. America has been hit hard by three hurricanes in recent weeks that have caused billions of dollars of damage in Texas, Florida and, most recently, Puerto Rico.

We have two guests on this episode of Our American States. First we’ll talk to Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick who will discuss how current recovery efforts are going and what steps his state took in preparation for Hurricane Harvey.

Then we’ll talk with Patrick S. Roberts, an associate professor at Virginia Tech, who has written a book on the rising expectations of government in disasters. Here is our conversation with the Texas lieutenant governor.

Let’s jump right in lieutenant governor. Your state was hit pretty hard, particularly in the Houston area, by Hurricane Harvey. I know you have personally spent considerable time going around the state seeing the areas affected by the storm. Tell us how recovery efforts are going right now.

DP: First of all, Houston was the area of most damage because it’s the largest population center. But the storm actually came in about 200 miles south of Houston in Corpus Christi and Rockport, Texas. And that would be like a storm hitting New York City and flooding Boston, because that’s about how far away Houston is from that area.

So we had the wind damage, Gene, in the Rockport, Corpus and Victoria areas that devastated rural areas, devastated by the storm from the wind. And then as the storm moved a little, it was Houston that was devastated by the flooding. And then move another roughly 150 miles and

you get to Beaumont and the Louisiana/Texas border, and Beaumont was inundated with flooding.

So you had a storm where the breadth of it was close to 300 miles long. That's along the coast and then into the coast. About 10 million people of our 27 million people were impacted. That's a third of our population, more than a third. And then direct impact on hundreds of thousands who have lost their homes. We probably, Gene, have 4-700,000 people displaced from their homes: they're out of their homes; they're living with family, friends, in apartments that they found or a hotel somewhere. FEMA is bringing in some trailers in the rural areas where they don't have extra hotels or extra apartments.

We have a million cars, Gene, if you can get your arms around that number ... a million cars under water that have been totaled, about 500,000 or more in the Houston area.

So what you had is rescue, recovery and rebuild. And in the rescue, the miracle is, and every life is precious... I wish we had not lost one... but for a storm that impacted such a great area, millions of people, less than 100 people died because of the great work of our first responders and the volunteers who came in. It was unbelievable. And then the recovery was the second step, those bodies, and getting people out of their homes who weren't in danger, but could not survive without water and power for a long time.

And now it's rebuilding and the rebuilding will take a long time. Hundreds of thousands of homes have to be remodeled or in some cases rebuilt; businesses the same. But Texas is strong, Texas is united, and we will get back on our feet. We've already started in many areas through the thousands and thousands of volunteers that go out and rip out sheetrock and carpet and kitchen cabinets and total houses, take the debris out to the curb, and then the building starts.

Gene: So affecting a third of your population, obviously the Legislature probably will be taking steps in the next session to address this. What kind of response do you expect the Legislature to take?

DP: When you have a disaster of this type there are really three levels: there's the federal government, the state government and local government. And throughout the counties that were impacted, dozens under federal disaster declaration, the county judges, the mayors, the first responders all did a terrific job with a lot of volunteers. And then the state stepped in and Governor Abbott has done an amazing job, he truly has, of being the commander overseeing this.

Just to give you an example, we had the city of Victoria without water for weeks. We had to ship in water every day for about 80,000 people. Beaumont was without water for several weeks – 140,000 people. Just the logistics of getting aircraft in to deliver water and trucks when the city was isolated... there was only one lane of one road open to get in. And the fact that we had to evacuate people out who were in serious medical crisis using the National Guard and getting them to our hospitals elsewhere in the state – the logistics of moving 12,000 National Guard troops to where they needed to be, 1,000 state troopers from around the state...

So it is a state's function primarily with the locals, and then you have to have the federal government there with FEMA, and President Trump from day one was on top of this issue. Gene, I will tell you, with all the county judges particularly and sheriffs in a lot of these counties that I met with, many of them have been through many storms, and they've all said the federal

government has never done a better job of getting in quickly with aid through FEMA through their new director, and the state has never done a better job. And I would say they've never done a better job.

But it's a long road to go and the next legislative session will have to address many needs. We need to look at new reservoirs around the City of Houston. They were on the map in the 1940s, several of them, and only a few were built, and decades ago other reservoirs should have been built. Our city now is just growing. Where those reservoirs were in the 1940s when they were built, they were out in the country and now there are a million people around those reservoirs that we had some issues with. So we're going to need more reservoirs, coastal barriers; so infrastructure will be key.

The federal government for the storm damage for the first 30 days, they step in and pay 100% of the cost to the local government and the state government. But after 30 days, depending on the particular cost, it can be 90/10. But there are limits on what they give each family and how they rebuild homes, particularly those who don't have flood insurance, which were the majority. So it is a complex network of federal, state and local and at the state level, we will try to make all of that come together in a cohesive manner to get people back in their homes, back at work as fast as we can.

Gene: And you had mentioned that this is not the first hurricane or natural disaster that's hit your state.

DP: No.

Gene: Do you have any advice for any other state legislatures across the country just in terms of taking steps legislatively to prepare for such an event?

DP: That's a great question, Gene, and let me give you two steps for sure. #1: You have to have a savings account. Now in Texas we have our general revenue account; I call it the checking account. And we have what's called the "rainy day fund" – actually the proper name is the Economic Stabilization Fund – that was designed to have money put aside each year in case we ever had an economic downturn so that we could pay the bills that the legislature had passed and appropriated for if the monies didn't come in as expected.

Well, we have 10 billion dollars in that fund. That's more money in savings than most of the states have together... most of the states, not all, but most of the states have combined. Under the leadership of Rick Perry and now Governor Abbot and me, we have been very careful on how we spend those funds. We only spend those when we can't pay our bills. We had a downturn in 2011 when the economy fell in 2009 where we had to take 3 billion out of it, but we've replenished it.

And the second reason we keep that funded... so #1 to pay our bills when economic times get tough, and that's for disasters. And we've been very careful with that. We'll probably take more money out of the rainy day fund now than ever before because we've never had a storm of this size. So #1: you have to have a savings, just like any family or any business, for times of disaster.

Then the second thing is you have to repair and train. And so we have a state-of-the-art emergency center in Austin. If it weren't for Nim Kid who directs that, our director – he's the chief – we would not have been prepared in the way we were. We've drilled and drilled and drilled.

And then you go down to the local level and the same thing. Gene, our county judges, our local sheriffs, they were prepared, they had trained, they were ready. And so as soon as we could get out on the roads, which in this case took a while... I couldn't get out of my neighborhood for a couple of days... but as soon as everyone could get out: our first responders, the state police, the National Guard, the plan was in place, whether at the county level or the state level.

That's what I recommend. You have to have money. You have to have training. You execute that plan and our people really executed it well.

Gene: Well, that's excellent advice to pass along and we appreciate your time today, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, for being on Our American States.

DP: Thank you Gene and we're praying for the folks in Florida and the Lieutenant Governor, and we pray for the people in Puerto Rico. We know what they are going through. It's a massive effort by our federal government and each of those states and each of those states and local municipalities to get through this. But America is strong and we will be better for it and stronger for it in the end.

Gene: We'll be back with the author of *Disasters and the American State* after this break.

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Music and Male VO: (not transcribing per instructions)

Gene: Now our conversation with Patrick S. Roberts, an Associate Professor at Virginia Tech, who has written a book called *Disasters and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected*.

Alright Patrick, let's dive into the relationships between the federal, state and local governments. You recently wrote an article for *The Conversation* that discussed five things that have changed with FEMA since Katrina and five that haven't.

Why don't we start with some of the things that have changed? What are the key positive developments that governments at the federal, state and local levels have adopted in your opinion?

PR: If you remember with Hurricane Katrina, a lot of the blame was pointed at FEMA: that FEMA was too slow to respond, too much red tape, too caught up with homeland security matters. But in truth there was blame enough to go around at all levels of government in the Katrina response.

FEMA made some major changes. Congress made some major changes in post-Katrina reform legislation. FEMA itself made major changes. And states and localities too have made major changes. Remember, they're the real first responders.

What's happened at FEMA: 1) Now presidents are more likely to appoint experts in charge of FEMA. During Hurricane Katrina the FEMA Director, Michael Brown, before coming to FEMA he helped monitor horse shows and horse show judges. So he was a political appointee. Maybe he was a bit of a fall guy during Katrina. There was really blame enough to go around. But he wasn't a career emergency manager.

After Katrina presidents have appointed career emergency managers, most recently President Trump appointing former Alabama Emergency Manager Brock Long. That's made a difference.

Also at the mid-level appointee ranks, presidents and Congress have realized that we need experienced emergency managers in there, and that's to help relationships with states and localities.

The second thing that happened: there's been more of an approach to really take into account the locality's first responder role in disasters. During the Obama Administration this new approach was called the Whole Community Approach. I think President Trump and Brock Long will come up with some other name. But this means that civil society is involved in disaster response above and beyond and before FEMA. That includes businesses.

So during the Harvey response we saw these pictures of the Texas grocery chain HEB sending big convoys of food and supplies to the affected region. And business after business was involved, often working with local governments. Nonprofits too were involved. And coordinating this community response is one of the biggest, most difficult, but also most important tasks of state and local government.

Sometimes the response isn't coordinated. The famous Cajun Navy – these are guys with bass boats responding to disasters along the Gulf Coast. A lot of that isn't coordinated or it's coordinated over social media.

The third big change is social media. During Katrina, if you remember, social media was a hobby of nerds and tech students and Facebook wasn't widely available. But now government agencies and rural Texans where I'm from, they all have Facebook and they're all on social media, and this is how people responded to disasters. This is how people learned where shelters were open, who needed help. This is how a lot of local agencies, sheriff's departments, dispelled rumors.

I followed the Harvey response and in my hometown of Victoria, Texas there were rumors going around that the power company was going to shut off the power, just shut it off I guess at will. The Sheriff's Department and the power company went to social media to say: no, we're not doing that, but sometimes the transformers fail and if that happens, here's where you can go for shelter, and be prepared to stay in place.

Social media I think could have done a lot of good in Katrina. Remember those pictures of dangerous conditions at Memorial Hospital where very sick and elderly patients died because of

power outages? That was hidden from news cameras during Katrina. Had it been broadcast on social media and then on television, lives might have been saved.

Gene: What about the five things that governments still need to work on, Patrick, when it comes to natural disasters and, in particular, things that maybe states need to pay attention to?

PR: There is still an issue of FEMA being personnel-wise a minnow in the whale of the Department of Homeland Security: FEMA being 3,000-or-so people in the Department of Homeland Security where there are 200,000-or-so people. FEMA gets a lot of the media attention. FEMA occupies a lot of the DHS secretary's time because it's so important, but it's still a small part of the agency. That misfit causes a lot of the problems I hear from state and local officials, from governors and mayors. There's some problem still working with the Homeland Security because of the many, many responsibilities.

During Katrina it was focused on terrorism. Terrorism is still an issue and part of the portfolio. But now immigration and border security are in the news. All of that just adds more and more issues to the DHS number of priorities and to the things DHS works with states and localities on, and it sometimes crowds out FEMA. So that's something to work on for the future.

There's still an issue with people thinking that FEMA is the cavalry – that FEMA is going to come to the rescue. I even saw pictures on CNN of a woman saying: Why hasn't FEMA come to pick me up yet? I saw them picking up my neighbor. Why haven't they come for me and my pet? In reality it was the Florida National Guard; it wasn't FEMA. So people really turning to FEMA when it's first the neighbors who are the first responders, then localities, then the states and things like the state National Guard, and FEMA only later. FEMA is a coordinator; FEMA is a big insurance company; during the recovery FEMA will be very important. But the first responders are usually already in the community for most people.

Another issue is that for a lot of disaster management, response is too late. A lot of disaster management really involves reducing people's vulnerability to disasters, to mitigating their effects. And that's everything from planning and zoning, to constructing dams and levees, to building wetlands, mangroves in Florida, to doing a lot of things to reduce the effects of disasters... to building infrastructure that will send water out of the city.

We saw the pictures of Houston, but they've really engaged in a lot of infrastructure efforts to use things like streets; also to put sewers and storm drains under them to send water out of populated areas, and that's very important. All of that occurs at the local level; it's really a matter for localities and sometimes states and regions, not so much for FEMA.

The same goes with mapping vulnerability. We saw a big issue for states and localities was: Who is ordering an evacuation? We saw in Texas that Governor Abbott made some comments about: well, we should evacuate, and some cities did, and barrier islands should almost always evacuate in the path of a hurricane. But the Houston mayor didn't evacuate. Sylvester Turner said: No, I don't want a general evacuation order; you need to look at your ability to withstand the storm and make a personal decision.

And so there were some political games about evacuation, but it turns out that evacuation in a major urban area is very complicated. Evacuations themselves kill people. After the Hurricane

Rita evacuation before Houston, people died because of auto accidents and because they got stuck. So evacuation is a tricky deal.

What do states and localities need to do? They need to think about getting vulnerable people to safety. That's the elderly; that's the people who need medical care; that's people in hospitals that might lose power, people in nursing homes – to get them out to safety. And people who can shelter in place, people who are in high ground, people who have resources, have food, water, social connections – they can stay if they want to make that choice, and sometimes that's for the best.

Gene: What we've been talking mostly about now are floods, but there are other natural disasters like earthquakes, fires, tornados, etc. If you were advising state legislatures on steps that they can take to be better prepared for natural disasters, what kind of advice would you give them?

PR: Absolutely. Floods are the most common. Natural disasters occur in every U.S. county... floods and droughts. And they are also the most costly on an annual basis. But there are other disasters of course: earthquakes, fires, tornados, pandemic diseases, all kinds of things. What can states and localities do? One thing they can do is to support planning.

I did a study of Oregon planning and found some very successful winter weather meetings where an emergency manager in a county, with some state support, would bring in a state weather expert from the state office, and maybe an expert from the national weather service, maybe someone from the Army Corps of Engineers. And then they'd bring in the relevant officials from the county. They'd bring in people from the fire department, people from schools, people from public works, people who had access to infrastructure, major nonprofit leaders.

They would talk about: What is the forecast for the upcoming winter weather? Oregon winter weather can be quite wet; you have snow and runoff. And during this planning meeting, they connect a forecast to tangible steps they could take. We need to check river gauges. We need to have an agreement with the schools to use buses. We need to talk about what kinds of agreements we need to put in place to use schools as shelters. We need to talk about what kind of overtime or staffing-up possibilities we have in case of a major disaster, and how do we handle that. And how do we handle issues with city officials' families, making sure they're safe?

All of these issues – a winter weather meeting can connect general forecasts: it's going to be hot, dry, seasonal weather meeting... to tangible actions people can take. And sometimes a little bit of state support can help that by bringing in an expert.

Gene: So we've been talking today with Patrick S. Roberts, an Associate Professor at the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech, and author of the book, *Disasters and the American State: How Politicians, Bureaucrats and the Public Prepare for the Unexpected*.

Patrick, we appreciate you sharing your expertise with us today on Our American States.

PR: Thank you very much. Great to talk with you.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on Itunes and Googleplay. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.