

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND THE ELECTION: Which Candidate Will Make Our Country Safer?

Election Day is just a few short weeks away. While debates and endless interviews over the last few months seemed to focus exclusively on the economy, taxes and financial markets, the candidates' views on emergency preparedness are more vital than ever to the way we run our businesses and lives as well as stabilize our national economic future. Unpredictable crisis events can strike at any moment, and it is essential that businesses of all sizes know how to respond and recover from these events to minimize negative impact to their employees, clients and revenue.

Homeland security and preparedness have been front and center with the war on terrorism and recent disasters from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Moving into a new presidential administration, it is important to know where each candidate stands on the issues of homeland security and emergency response and preparedness, and how it will affect the U.S. over the next four years. It is equally important, however, to learn from the major events which have brought us to our current situation to guide our future preparedness efforts.

Looking Back

September 11, 2001 is a date ingrained on most Americans' minds. It invokes harsh memories of uncertainty, fear and sadness. But 9/11 did more than just leave a blot on many Americans' memories – it profoundly and forever altered the state of security and preparedness in this country.

Many changes have occurred in the fields of disaster preparedness and homeland security since that time. Post 9/11, the U.S. saw the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which transferred many government agencies including U.S. Customs, Immigrations and Naturalization, the Transportation and Security Administration (TSA) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to the control of the DHS under single leadership.

In the years after 9/11, with the creation of the new DHS, the way many Americans lived their lives and ran their businesses changed:

- This country learned we are not immune from attacks and that terrorism can be both foreign and domestic.
- Air travel and security became a primary focus and changed the way all Americans travel.
- Strict requirements for identification at all borders and ports of entry were enforced and new regulations on passports were enacted.

The events of that day also re-energized our admiration for fire fighters, police and other first responders and taught us that emergency preparedness should be top of mind on both a business and personal level. "We've learned many lessons since 9/11", said Dr. Irwin Redlener,

the Director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, in an interview in *The New York Times*. "What is abundantly clear is that successful preparedness cannot be done by government alone – or citizens alone."

Lessons Learned

While 9/11 ignited the changes, the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina was a harsh reminder that America, both government and citizens, still has a long way to go in terms of disaster planning and recovery.

Even though Katrina occurred more than three years ago, many Americans still have a daily reminder of that event – the almost complete destruction of a city, failure of an entire infrastructure and more than 1,800 people killed. Businesses that weren't destroyed or underwater were virtually cut off, with employees unable to even reach their place of work. In addition, many government agencies did not take appropriate actions to protect the citizens of New Orleans before, during or after the hurricane.

In comparison, Hurricane Gustav proved, on many levels, to be a successful test. While Katrina hit New Orleans residents without warning, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issued a mandatory evacuation order before Gustav made landfall. As a result, almost 90% of residents left the city, there were no rescues of stranded residents needed and crime was kept to a minimum. "This [Hurricane Gustav] is a very different story, a different result", said Mayor Ray Nagin in an article featured on KATC.com. "We learned a lot from Katrina. We executed at a really high level and we continue to do that."

Government agencies also learned valuable lessons from Katrina in preparation for Gustav:

- Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal ordered the National Guard on scene before Gustav hit.
- There was a predetermined disaster declaration which allowed for immediate federal involvement.
- Over the last three years, FEMA has added more staff – 2,600 full time employees and nearly 4,000 standby disaster assistance employees. They've upgraded their systems and continue to work with local, state and other federal agencies to deliver relief to those afflicted.

The Next Four Years

It is clear - this country is in the midst of an era seemingly defined by continuous, successive disasters – some predictable, some not. Looking ahead to the next administration, special attention must be paid to mitigate, respond and recover from disasters in a more efficient and effective manner.

While both candidates differ drastically on many issues, they do share similar views when it comes to the preparedness and security of this country. See how they compare and contrast:

McCain (from www.johnmccain.com)

Terrorism and Homeland Security

- McCain plans to bring into his administration strong management at the federal level, experienced in combating terrorist risks and disaster response and recovery.
- McCain will strengthen the process of screening both individuals and cargo before they enter the U.S.

Disaster Response and Recovery

- Believes homeland security must also consider threats posed by major accidents or nature itself. His strategy is to try and prevent, prepare and respond to disasters of all kinds and improve the recovery process for disaster victims.
- Government run Emergency Operations Centers in the U.S. should include a Business Operations Center that partners with the private sector to provide even more resources during a disaster.

Protecting Infrastructure

- McCain will provide an effective framework for protecting critical infrastructure including water and food systems, chemical and defense systems, information technology, energy resources and others.

Obama (from www.barackobama.com)

Terrorism and Homeland Security

- Obama will create secure borders and will add personnel, infrastructure and technology on all borders and ports of entry.
- Obama plans to develop new capabilities and international partnerships to engage the world and dry up support for terrorism and extremism.

Disaster Response and Recovery

- Obama will enhance the national resilience to risks including terrorism and natural disasters by working with states, localities and the private sector as partners in prevention and response.
- Obama will further improve coordination between all levels of government to create better evacuation plan guidelines, ensure prompt federal assistance to emergency zones and increase medical surge capacity.

Protecting Infrastructure

- An Obama administration would plan to protect our drinking water, protect the public from radioactive releases and protect the nation's chemical plants.

In essence, emergency preparedness is vital to the future of our businesses, families, communities, and this country. Looking ahead during uncertain times, businesses must take the lead in forging self-sufficient emergency preparedness infrastructures and practices outside of government assistance, and consider how those programs can be permeated out to their

broader employee bases and families. Only then do we truly begin to drive a culture and behavior change toward proactive preparedness in America.