

In the wake of hurricane Irene, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to come hat in hands asking for more money from Congress. Like the rest of the government, it is broke. It has been suggested that any additional funds allocated to FEMA should come from cuts elsewhere. This seems harsh and lacking in compassion to big government advocates who do not understand economics, but I would go a step further. FEMA should never have been established. It is based on misguided ideas of disaster relief.

This seems shocking to those who have never been subjected to the secondary disaster that is the arrival of FEMA on the scene of a catastrophic event. But explaining FEMA's ineptness is not the same thing as saying no one should help people affected by disasters. Quite the opposite.

Victims of disasters should get any and all help possible, and there is virtually no limit to the generosity and compassion of good American people after devastation hits. One only need to remember the outpouring after Katrina to know this is true. FEMA, however, did more to get in the way of relief than to actually provide and facilitate it. The examples are numerous. When the call was put out for volunteer firefighters, they volunteered by the thousands. It was FEMA, for reasons of control and bureaucratic ineptitude, who made sure they were not, in fact allowed to actually help. When a group of firefighters arrived from Houston, instead of being put immediately on the job, they were told to sit around and wait. After waiting for two days doing nothing, they were simply sent home. One thousand volunteer firefighters were sent to Atlanta to undergo sexual harassment training while fires actively raged in the city. The ones that remained through this stupidity were sent to escort the president around or to distribute fliers instead of putting out fires. Computer engineer Jack Harrison was told his skills were needed to rebuild technological infrastructure. After being given the runaround for about two weeks, he was misallocated as head of security on the cruise ship FEMA had leased, when he should have been using his skills to help. All manner of help was turned away or mismanaged by FEMA while people suffered and waited. Even the Red Cross had its hands tied by FEMA.

It has only gotten worse since 9/11. Compare the stories of two flotillas - one after 9/11 and one after Katrina. Within an hour of the 9/11 attacks, the largest boatlift in history was organized spontaneously by locals who saw an immediate need and responded immediately. Over 500,000 terrified New Yorkers were taken off the island by ferries, tugboats, pleasure crafts, fishing boats and barges when all other access points had been shut down. A similar flotilla attempt was privately organized after Katrina. 500 boats caravanned to New Orleans to rescue patients from hospitals that were out of supplies and desperate. Unfortunately, FEMA had taken over by then and they were turned away, empty, while the patients languished, still stranded. Tragically, the Vermont Air National Guard helicopters were in Iraq when Irene hit,

and they were desperately needed here.

The establishment of FEMA is symptomatic of a blind belief in big government's ability to do anything and everything for anyone and everyone. FEMA is a bureaucratic organization. Bureaucracies, while staffed with well-meaning people, are notoriously slow and wasteful by their very nature. When people are starving, injured and dying they need speed and efficiency, yet FEMA comes along with forms and policies and rubber stamps. This sort of thing is bad enough at the DMV, but in matters of life and death where seconds count, this is just not acceptable.

True compassion would be to get FEMA out of the way.