Un-Katrina response

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

This time around, authorities at all levels appear to be acting quickly and effectively to lessen the loss of life and the damage from a national disaster. The fires raging across Southern California are certainly a national tragedy, with nearly 1 million people forced from their homes and nearly 700 square miles burned. But authorities at the local, state and national levels appear so far to be doing their part to help those affected and to bring the fires under control. Of course, first credit has to go to the valiant firefighting crews battling the blazes and to the emergency service personnel and others who have been responsible for alerting citizens to the danger and for helping to ensure they get out in time.

But officials who have been coordinating those efforts and providing needed financial assistance have been doing their parts, too. President Bush joined that list Wednesday when he signed a federal disaster declaration, freeing up federal funds for families affected by the wildfires in seven counties.

And of course, thanks will be due to all those private citizens who already have or will donate to the Red Cross and other relief agencies to help those in need.

This is not a repeat of the very human failure that helped flood New Orleans with misery and destruction after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005. In fact, federal officials acknowledge that the failures in the Katrina disaster helped guide the government's response to the fires.

To be sure, the nature of this disaster is different. The fires have devastated the region, but they haven't engulfed it as Katrina engulfed New Orleans. By contrast, as CNN noted in an article, roads in Southern California have remained open for residents to get out and for help to get in without delay. Victims in California are not stranded on rooftops without food or drinkable water but are able to travel the relatively short distances to safe places. Furthermore, residents there are generally more affluent and are able to use their own vehicles to escape, whereas many of Katrina's victims were poor and had no means of transportation.

Still, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has reacted far more effectively, as have local and state authorities. Here's hoping their work will be done soon and that they continue to limit the damage and loss.

To donate to the American Red Cross to help those affected by the fires in Southern California, go to www.redcross.org and click on "California Wildfires."

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