FEMA computers hampered during Katrina

October 10 2005

Faulty federal computer networks may have been partly to blame for the government's lackadaisical response to major storms last summer -- and Hurricane Katrina this year, experts tell UPI's Networking.

A new federal audit of the information technology infrastructure at the Federal Emergency Management Agency indicates that the government's computers were "overwhelmed" during last year's hurricane season and that the problems may have hampered disaster response efforts.

The report, which covers the 2004 hurricane season, may help the government interpret this year's hurricane recovery effort too, experts said. The report was presented to FEMA Director Michael Brown in the weeks before Katrina hit.

The audit indicates that FEMA's Logistics Information Management System (LIMS III) was not up to the task of tracking the status of supplies like tents, water and ice. The computer network was also unable to share data with state and local agencies. This hampered hurricane recovery in Florida in August and September 2004, the report said.

A FEMA spokeswoman, however, indicated that the networks were not designed for the tasks for which they were called to perform.

Other federal agencies that went offline during the storm are still struggling to recover from the natural disaster. This is impacting Medicaid benefits, among other government programs.

Thousands of refugees who received Medicaid benefits have had to re-enroll in the program to qualify for benefits now that they are living in a new location, a factor that has affected their quality of care.

"The state of disarray of medical records in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina only reinforces the need for improved Medicaid efficiency," Bruce Greenstein, former associate regional director for the government's Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and now vice president of CNSI, based in Rockville, Md., told Networking.

The American Red Cross also experienced technology issues during the hurricane but was able to recover through the use of volunteers. "The American Red Cross had a similar technology issue like FEMA when it came to tracking evacuees at shelters scattered across the U.S.," said a spokeswoman for Rackspace.com, a Web-hosting company based in San Antonio. "Employees at Rackspace.com have spent countless hours volunteering at Texas shelters and they found that the process for handling evacuees who were arriving at the shelter had a lot of room for improvement."

The spokeswoman said that the Internet-savvy employees, on their own, set up a database to track the status of the evacuees, and now thousands of victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita are in the database. "This tracking system tells shelter officials when evacuees leave the building, temporarily, and lets officials know when evacuees have left for good," the spokeswoman told Networking.

The company, working with the Red Cross, also developed ID badges for the evacuees, so they could open up new bank accounts or rent apartments, for many lost all of their identification, birth certificates, baptismal certificates, passports and Social Security cards during the storm, she said.

The problems encountered by the government's computers have been known for some time. The Government Accountability Office this spring issued a report indicating that an array of government agencies had security problems with their WiFi networks.

The government is also increasingly vulnerable to attacks on its information-technology infrastructure, which wreak havoc throughout the year. "Recently, the Department of Homeland Security got nailed with a worm that hit the plug-and-play vulnerability in Windows 2000," said Brenda Christensen, a spokeswoman for Glendale, Calif.-based Panda Software. "This is the same worm that brought down ABC News and CNN in August."

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