Due to Katrina, American cities now have better evacuation plans

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Daniel Hess builds cities for people. So when Hess, University at Buffalo associate professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, arrived in New Orleans in 2005 about two weeks after Hurricane Katrina and walked around empty streets – void of people – it was chilling, he said.

"It was a city that was not habitable," says Hess, whose research focuses on emergency preparedness. "I am an urban planning scholar, and we worry about making beautiful cities and neighborhoods. What you need for that urban vibrancy is people, and all we saw was flooded houses and neighborhoods worse than I could have expected."

What it turned out the city needed, Hess said, was a better evacuation plan.

"In the hardest hit Lower Ninth Ward I saw the water line and debris line on buildings well past the first floor," he said. "We saw places where people didn't evacuate, and they had climbed up to the attic, found a hatchet and pounded their way out of the ceiling. These houses had holes in the roof where they had escaped from; it was their only way out."

As part of a UB reconnaissance team, Hess spent a week commuting from Baton Rouge to New Orleans – a trip that took triple the time it typically does due to congested highways, Hess said – looking at hospital performance.

His team interviewed hospital officials about the contents of their emergency evacuation plan, how they were able to implement it, and how evacuations were conducted. Some hospitals did well, he said, and some did quite poorly.

But it was not just hospitals that struggled with evacuation plans, Hess said. It was the city as a whole.

"One of the problems with Hurricane Katrina was that there were vehicles available – including school buses, public transit vehicles and coaches – but they were not poised for evacuation deployment, and drivers were not available. Resources were not coordinated," Hess said.

Things are better now, he says. For example, there is a bank of available people, including community volunteers, who can drive high-capacity vehicles like vans and buses. This will help emergency planners move a lot of people out quickly should another disaster strike.

During Katrina, people relied on city officials for evacuation. After the hurricane, it became clear that that was not enough, so now there are plans in place for volunteers, called 'evacuteers,' to offer assistance, Hess said.

Katrina has changed Hess' focus. Since his visit to New Orleans his research has shifted in part to include evacuation preparedness and planning. He has evaluated community response to various disasters, including Hurricane Sandy and the tsunami in Japan following the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster.

He also went to New Orleans after Hurricane Gustav, two years after Katrina, and was pleasantly surprised by the improvements. Though Hurricane Gustav lacked the severity of Katrina, it gave officials in New Orleans an opportunity to implement new emergency procedures that

had been revised after Katrina.

"No city wants to be the next Hurricane Katrina and have thousands of people left behind," he said. "Large-scale emergency planning is generally better now than it was then. We learned a lot of horrible things from Hurricane Katrina, but we are better off because of it."

Provided by University at Buffalo