

Statement of

The Honorable Mary Landrieu

United States Senator
Louisiana
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Testimony of Senator Mary L. Landrieu
Before the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing
On Rising Violent Crime in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting Senator Vitter and me to testify about the disturbing increase in criminal activity that has overwhelmed the city of New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. I would also like to welcome and thank our constituents, U.S. Attorney Jim Letten, Judge David Bell, Deputy Police Commissioner Anthony Cannatella, and Bob Stellingworth for coming here today. Each of them works on the front lines of this crisis and I anticipate that their insights into the problem will be invaluable to this Committee's efforts to assist New Orleans on the federal level.

This past January, the violent crime situation in New Orleans seemed to transform itself from being a daily news story typical of a large city to a crisis that shook the very foundation of our community. On the morning of January 4th, a home intruder shot and killed Helen Hill, a local filmmaker, and severely wounded her husband, Paul Gailiunas, a physician who had established a medical clinic to treat the city's poor and uninsured. When the police arrived at their home at about 5:30 AM, they found Paul Gailiunas kneeling by the front door, bleeding profusely from his three gunshot wounds, and clutching his two-year old son in his arms. Helen Hill's body lay nearby, having been brutally shot in the neck. Her death was the sixth murder that occurred within a span of twenty-four hours. The next day, our local newspaper ran with the headline "Killings Bring the City to its Bloodied Knees." It was at this point, that the entire city of New Orleans knew that the level of violence had spun completely out of control.

In 2006, over 160 murders occurred across the City of New Orleans, giving it the ominous distinction of being the city with the most murders per capita in the United States. Depending upon the particular population estimate you read, this homicide rate totals between 63 and 73 murders per 100,000 people. In fact, the 2006 homicide rate in New Orleans is 31 percent higher than the city with the next highest murder rate--Gary, Indiana. Tragically, one-third of the murder victims have been teenagers. The surge in murders has occurred across the City and the neighborhoods hit the hardest have been Mid-City and downtown. Many of these murders have gone unsolved and as of a couple of weeks ago, only one has resulted in a successful prosecution.

This year, the number of murders only seems to be increasing. As of June 18th, 91 murders have occurred across the city and the number could likely increase as more people return home to New Orleans.

Over the past several months, in response to the crime, the Congress appropriated \$50 million in the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations bill aimed at combating crime on the Gulf Coast. In assisting the Gulf, the Congress created a formula based upon each community's needs. Among other objectives, these dollars will ensure the full implementation of the New Orleans Anti-Crime Plan, which is supported by Common Good, the Metropolitan Crime Commission, Citizens for One Greater New Orleans, the City Council, as well as the local law enforcement community. Most significantly, the Emergency Supplemental waives the Stafford Act's requirement that localities match 10 percent of the cost of disaster recovery projects before the federal government pays the remaining 90 percent. This match has kept law enforcement and other public infrastructure tied in a morass of red tape for nearly two years. Hopefully, we will now be able to begin the long process of rebuilding three of our police stations, several of our jails and other critically important law enforcement infrastructure at a significantly faster pace.

As Chairman Leahy mentioned, earlier this year, in consultation with our local law enforcement officials and community leaders, I offered a ten-point plan on behalf of the community to stem the increase in crime throughout New Orleans. I wanted to take some time to review some portions of this plan and to offer some suggestions for our work going forward.

First, it is critically important that we provide the necessary infrastructure for law enforcement to do its job. The headquarters of the New Orleans Police Department currently operates out of a group of double-wide trailers. The police also lack a permanent central evidence and property storage facility, a special operations division/traffic division complex; and a juvenile division holding facility. In addition, seven of our eleven jails have not yet been repaired including the Old Parish Prison, the Community Correctional Center, the Templeman Phase I & II Jail, and the Templeman Phase III & IV Jail. Together, these four prisons held over 4,000 inmates. If we expect the police to restore order to the city, we need to ensure that they have the basic infrastructure so that they can perform their jobs properly.

Second, as Chairman Leahy mentioned, we asked the Department of Justice to increase the number of DEA and FBI agents in New Orleans. In response, Attorney General Gonzalez dispatched six additional assistant U.S. Attorneys, nine additional FBI agents, and several additional agents from the Drug Enforcement Agency and the United States Marshals Service. We are grateful for the Department of Justice's response to our request and we look forward to working with DOJ in the future to implement other portions of our plan.

Third, we requested that an emergency COPS grant be issued to parishes that Hurricanes Rita and Katrina impacted. The NOPD has lost over 500 police officers since Hurricane Katrina, which constitutes over 30% of the entire force. In order to combat the surge in murders, we simply need more boots on the ground who understand the city and who appreciate the challenges that each of the city's neighborhoods face. I know that this Congress, and in particular, this Committee, have moved aggressively in re-authorizing the COPS program. In particular, the legislation authorizes significant resources for local agencies to hire officers in general community policing efforts. As the Senate moves forward in the re-authorization process,

I would like to work closely with this Committee to ensure that significant COPS funding can be allocated to New Orleans, Jefferson parish, and other parishes that have faced significant law enforcement challenges related to the flooding.

In concert with the COPS grant, we have requested that the federal government help construct a new police academy and provide additional funding for the already established Gulf Coast Regional Policing Institute. This will assist the city of New Orleans and the entire region in creating and training a new generation of law enforcement officials who are rooted in their communities and have a vested interest in making them a safer place to live.

As part of our ten-point plan, we also proposed the creation of a state-of-the-art crime surveillance system for the City of New Orleans. By creating a more up-to-date surveillance system, New Orleans's law enforcement community will have greater opportunities to identify, arrest and successfully prosecute violent criminals. The COPS bill authorizes funding for law enforcement technology grants. It is my hope to work with this Committee to ensure that the COPS bill accounts for cities, like New Orleans, that have undergone a natural disaster and that have lost significant amounts of technological resources necessary to fight crime.

We have also asked that the federal government release \$13 million in Social Services Block Grant funds to assist the city in its drug rehabilitation efforts. Approximately 70% of the murders in New Orleans are drug related. Similarly, the majority of the crimes involving juvenile offenders are drug-related. Judge Bell will no doubt mention that the City lacks adequate resources to treat juvenile offenders who have committed a non-violent drug-related crime. By investing in drug rehabilitation early on, we can literally save the lives of these young people and prevent them from becoming repeat offenders in our criminal justice system.

We have also called for greater FEMA coordination with local law enforcement agencies, the reactivation of the Gulf State Initiative, which is a drug trafficking intelligence sharing program between the Department of Defense, the Louisiana National Guard and State Police, and have requested a study of the post-hurricane criminal justice system in Louisiana. Any help that this Committee can provide in implementing these critical programs will be invaluable in our recovery efforts.

Finally, it is important to underscore that additional funding is only part of the solution. We need to demand accountability and coordination on all levels of government--from our local police, from our prosecutors, and from the City's Court system as a whole. With accountability, coordination, and additional funding, we can fight the surge of murders on all fronts.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this important hearing. I realize this hearing today is only a step, but it is an important one. And while New Orleans's challenges are large, the people fighting to save our city--some of whom you'll hear from momentarily--have exactly what it takes to turn our community around. I look forward to working with this Committee, Senator Vitter, our local law enforcement leaders and community activists in helping stem the flow of violence that has spread across New Orleans.