



## Heroes in the Storm

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*How Louisiana's Elected Officials Took Advantage of Leader Teleconferencing to Manage the Katrina Disaster*

*By Michael T. McKibben, Chairman & Founder  
Leader Technologies Incorporated, Columbus, Ohio, October 25, 2005*

**A**lthough media pundits have been relentless in their criticism of Louisiana's crisis management since Katrina swept across the Gulf to ravage New Orleans and the surrounding parishes, they have ignored one vital area that the state managed very well: a coordinated emergency communications effort among all the state agencies, federal disaster agencies, and elected officials statewide. After August 28, 2005, one of Louisiana's emergency phone systems was not only entirely functional throughout the disaster, but it grew to include real-time recorded and web-posted reports. And, it helped support collaboration among a large group of unsung heroes in this disaster: Louisiana's state and local officials.



New Orleans Swamped, August 30, 2005  
Source: [www.gov.state.la.us](http://www.gov.state.la.us)

### **The Governor Calls on Leader Technologies**

When Katrina first hit, coordinating communications among so many agencies and officials seemed to be impossible as the state's official emergency communication systems went down the day New Orleans flooded.

Governor Kathleen Blanco and Chief of Staff Andy Kopplin contacted Leader Technologies, which had introduced our communications services to Louisiana's telecommunications officials some months earlier. Could Leader, they wanted to know, connect 200 Louisiana agencies and federal partners and elected officials scattered across the state and nation into an emergency response conference call and provide them SWAT-like, real time services as they worked to respond to the disaster?

Leader could, and did. We committed five engineers to the project to ensure a working telephone collaborative service.

Meanwhile, Governor Blanco and her staff went to work. The telephone conferencing strategy was a necessity because travel was so difficult. Roads were clogged or blocked, air traffic unreliable, and officials were scattered across the state and nation. However, some phones and radios did work. In the field, people got creative. They increased the power on working mobile phone systems, expanding their reach. Portable systems were set up. Some even set up mobile WiFi networks to expand capabilities with data networks and voice over Internet calls.

On August 30, 2005, the same day we got the call, the Governor rallied the leadership in her command center and linked it to her elected officials via Leader’s teleconferencing services. The calls began with an eight p.m. call that included the congressional delegation, statewide elected officials, federal partners, and agency chiefs and their aids. They received up-to-the-minute reports, shared needs, discussed strategy and tactics and solved problems on the spot.

### **New Solutions for Emerging Problems**

From this point, communications among officials increased exponentially. The Governor’s Chief of Staff and Finance Chief received special Leader telephone numbers and secure calling PINs that allowed them to conduct conference calls “on the fly.” These calls occurred dynamically, many times a day. In addition, state agencies including Fisheries & Wildlife, Social Services, Homeland, Security, Labor, Transportation, Natural Resources, American Red Cross, FEMA, Corrections, Economic Development, Education, Board of Regents, Health & Hospitals, Environmental Quality, Development, and Administration gathered their first responders into LeaderPhone facilitated teleconferencing confabs to decide on an hourly and daily basis what they would do next to save lives, help victims, and enlist aid.

### **Timeline of Response to Katrina**

**Friday, August 26, 2005**

Gov. Kathleen Blanco declares a state of emergency

**Saturday, August 27**

Gov. Blanco requests federal assistance

**9:30 AM, Sunday, August 28**

New Orleans Mayor Nagin issues mandatory evacuation

**7 AM, Monday, August 29**

Katrina makes landfall as a Category 4 hurricane

**8 AM, Monday, August 29**

Mayor Nagin reports lower ninth ward levee breaching

**Early Tuesday, August 30**

Louisiana’s statewide emergency telephone conferencing system fails

**9:55 AM, Tuesday, August 30**

Gov. Blanco’s office contacts Leader to request emergency telephone conferencing services

**9:57 AM, Tuesday, August 30**

LeaderPhone® is up and running, providing emergency teleconferencing services

**The First Week: August 30-September 3**

LeaderPhone® used day and night by senior Louisiana officials (LeaderPhone® never goes down)

**Sunday, September 4, 2005**

Chief of Staff Andy Kopplin requests that Leader design a means of listening to conference calls and reports via both web and phone

**9 PM, Tuesday September 6, 2005**

Leader goes live with Leader News®

**Wednesday, September 14**

State Agency leaders able to phone in their reports at their convenience

**Collaboration Continues Unabated**

Louisiana now has a complete system, unprecedented in emergency response

At the end of the first week, nerves were frayed, officials were exhausted, and it became clear to Chief of Staff Kopplin that while officials certainly needed the information, their ability to listen and participate was limited by their ability to stay awake after long, stressful days saving lives, helping evacuees and solving problems.

Mr. Kopplin asked us if we could continue to facilitate the conference calls, and also record the calls and make them available via both web and phone for people to listen to at their convenience. Our special software architecture allowed us to quickly deploy the requested feature, which we named Leader News®. We had only to distribute a special 800 number and access code to the parties involved. With this in hand, any authorized elected official could dial in and listen to the recorded conference calls. Alternatively, the official could log on to the website, click on the name of the recording, and listen to it.

In addition, some state agency heads also wanted to be able to call and record their field reports right from their phones. At Mr. Kopplin’s request, Leader created a way to do this. Leader added the ability for agency heads or their administrative assistants to upload written reports online, to the same web location.

In the space of a few weeks, in emergency conditions, Leader created for the Governor of Louisiana a system unprecedented in emergency response that gave her a dedicated capability to report to and communicate with responsible officials throughout the state and nation online or via voice. The added benefit of the Leader system is that this system becomes an in-built data archive and knowledge bank for emergency response personnel. As a result of our experience with Katrina, we are adding the ability to store and listen to voice alerts as well.

**Users of LeaderPhone®, Leader Alert® & Leader News® can:**

**Conference** - Dial an 800 number or go online, use a special access code and start conferencing

**Send Voice & Text Alerts** - Go online to select pre-recorded alerts or send custom alerts “on the fly”

**Read/Upload News/Reports/Files/Documents** – Dial an 800 number and listen to recordings of conference calls and reports. Or, go online to listen to the same recordings and download documents.

Leader® services are powered by a scalable, secure, patent pending software engine called the Digital Leaderboard®

**Preparing for the Next Catastrophe – The Vital Role of State and Local Officials**

Since the communications failures of September 11, all of us in the software and telecommunications world have been evaluating various systems and procedures for incident response. We appear to have overlooked the obvious: *the role of state and local elected officials*. In Louisiana, web-enhanced telephone conferencing capabilities allowed statewide elected officials to get real-time, accurate information, which became vital to hourly in-the-field decisions that saved lives and property. Much of this activity was organized by statewide elected officials who were, by necessity, stepping in to augment the activities of their first responders, who were understandably focused almost exclusively on life-saving.

Louisiana’s experience shows us that in a disaster of this magnitude, emergency responders must indeed focus simply on saving lives. A myriad of problems remained for state and local officials and agencies to solve. But these are the people who are the most familiar

with and have the greatest stake in the areas they represent. Leader’s communication system provided elected officials with a formal forum where their authority could have an effect and an impact.

In a recent conversation with former two-term Columbus, Ohio Mayor Dana G. Rinehart, I asked if the city of Columbus had ever prepared to handle the kind of widespread destruction caused by Katrina. His categorical response: “No way.”

Many cities would probably concede a similar level of unpreparedness. Happily, this no longer needs to be the case. At Leader Technologies, we are proud that our systems made it possible for elected officials to respond to the Katrina disaster. We provided reliable, viable communications, a way to share real-time, accurate information, and the flexibility to create additional features when our clients needed them. The elected officials took that capability and used it to the advantage of the people of Louisiana. We believe that other states should consider doing the same.

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*Mike McKibben is the Chairman and Founder of Leader Technologies Incorporated, a web software company that specializes in integrating voice, video & data across existing application systems to enhance collaboration & decision making. Leader provided a simulated emergency conferencing and alerting environment for Terrorex '04 in Las Vegas that was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Boeing and the U.S. Department of Defense. More recently Mr. McKibben co-hosted the Ohio Homeland Security Initiative at Ohio State University to bring together existing, working technologies to assist the first responder community in getting effective, scalable solutions implemented sooner rather than later. Mr. McKibben was a finalist for the Columbus Technology Council’s 2005 Executive of the Year. Learn more about Leader at [www.leader.com](http://www.leader.com). You may contact Mr. McKibben at [mmckibben@leader.com](mailto:mmckibben@leader.com) , or at Leader Technologies, 614-890-1986.*

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