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**CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT WIDENS:  
MAJORITY OF PUBLIC DOUBTS GOVERNMENT'S ABILITIES IN FACE OF  
HURRICANES, PANDEMIC FLU, AND THREATS OF TERRORISM**

*Persistent lack of accountability within government and confusion among  
Citizens impedes process of preparedness*

**(NEW YORK) – November 21, 2005** – More than four years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, two months after the major devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and amid growing fears of pandemic flu, **confidence in the federal government's ability to protect the American public has continued to fall to a new crisis level**, according to a new study commissioned by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

**Just 42% of Americans** polled believe the government is capable of protecting their communities from a terrorist attack, the survey said. That figure, from Americans polled in October 2005, is down from 49% in July 2005, 53% in 2004, and 62% - a full 20 percentage points – from 2003.

The slow response to Katrina damaged public confidence in government competency in disaster response – from bioterrorism to natural disasters to pandemic flu – more dramatically in the three months between the July and October 2005 surveys than in the four years following the September 11 attacks.

The survey of 1,052 adults was conducted by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion on October 12, 13 and 17, 2005, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. A similar poll was conducted in July 2005 as a follow-up to 2004 and 2003 studies to identify trends and public attitudes related to September 11 and the war on terrorism and the country's preparedness.

Only about one third (35%) of the American public is confident in the health care system's readiness to **respond effectively to a deadly flu pandemic**. This is in line with the July 2005 finding of the public's confidence (39%) in the health care system to respond efficiently to a biological, chemical, or radiological attack, as well as **from 2004**. It is down, however, from 46% in 2003 and 53% in 2002.

Although hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed major deficiencies in communication, preparedness and response efforts by governmental agencies, such as FEMA and local offices of emergency management, the American public's efforts to be personally prepared **remain unchanged from before Katrina**. **Only 35% of the population feels they are personally prepared for a terror attack** compared to **53% who feel prepared for a natural disaster or emergency weather event** in their community.

These divisions between preparedness and familiarity of community plans for natural disasters/emergency weather events versus terror attacks reveal **a fundamental misunderstanding of the all-hazards message** of FEMA, DHS, the Red Cross, and other disaster planning and response agencies.

The findings reveal a dramatic drop in perception toward community plans – dropping from 51% **believing that their community has an adequate response plan in place for a natural or weather event in July to 39% in October 2005. Moreover, only 31% believe that there is an adequate community plan for a terror attack.**

“In these times of legitimate public health threats, including the pandemic flu, I am particularly concerned about the persistent lack of confidence in the U.S. health care system to respond to terrorism or other disasters,” said Irwin Redlener, MD, associate dean and director of the Mailman School’s NCDP. “While this can be legitimately explained by a series of public health debacles, the most recent being the public health response to Hurricane Katrina, the crisis of the pandemic flu vaccine shortage and the inability to identify the source of the anthrax crisis after the 9/11 attacks more than four years ago, it is distressing and dangerous for Americans to lose confidence in the national health and public health systems.”

Redlener added, “Right now, with such a damaged public confidence level in overall government competency, we have a compelling need to make sure that the nation takes seriously the need to move ahead with appropriate steps to establish some accountability and set benchmarks that will improve preparedness for the possibility of all major disasters, including terrorism.”

#### **Key survey results include:**

- Nearly forty percent (38%) believe the **federal government is most responsible for ensuring communities are prepared for a terrorist attack.** However, another third (31%) believe local governments are and one-fifth (20%), believe it is state government.

However, when asked about **natural disaster or emergency weather events**, the responses are reversed. Just less than half (45%) believe local governments are **most responsible for ensuring communities are prepared**, with nearly a quarter (23%) saying state governments and less than one fifth (17%) saying federal government.

- Feelings about personal preparedness have gone unchanged from before Katrina. When asked if they felt **personally prepared for a natural disaster or emergency weather event** in their community, just over half (53%) described themselves as “prepared” or “very prepared” versus a third (35%) feel **personally prepared for a terror attack in their community.**
- Despite an increased call for the public to prepare, only a third (34%) of the American public reports being familiar with **emergency or evacuation plans in their community in the event of a natural disaster or emergency event.** Additionally, over half (56%) **would not evacuate their home or office to go to a distant location when ordered to do so in the event of a terror attack** either because they would not leave or they would wait until concerns for children and loved ones are addressed. These figures are **unchanged** from before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.
- Nearly half (44%) said they would not leave if they **lacked confidence** in who is ordering them to evacuate. – an increase of 6% prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

**The National Center for Disaster Preparedness recommends:**

1. Expanded programs to educate the general public about the need to prepare, accompanied by more research to determine the most effective means to get the message across to the public. Previous studies have repeatedly identified the Surgeon General as the best spokesperson.
2. Streamline the personal and family preparedness message to the public, which includes revamping the entire approach to planning preparedness. There should be different response strategies for large mega-events and smaller events, both for natural and terror-related disasters; and,
3. The government needs to triple its investment in the hospitals and public health system (federal, state and local health agencies).

In addition to the data summarized in this release, more detailed information will be available on the NCDP Web site at [www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu](http://www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu).

**The National Center for Disaster Preparedness** at the Mailman School of Public Health is an academically-based, inter-disciplinary program focused on the nation's capacity to prevent and respond to terrorism and major disasters. NCDP provides curriculum development in bioterrorism, training for public health professionals and other first responders, development of model programs, a wide-ranging research agenda and public policy analysis around issues germane to disaster preparedness. [www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu](http://www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu)

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