

---

# NEWS RELEASE

---

**Louisiana  
Department of State**



**Tom Schedler  
Secretary of State**

---

**P.O. Box 94125  
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9125  
[www.sos.la.gov](http://www.sos.la.gov)**



**Meg Casper  
Press Secretary  
225.362.5086  
[meg.casper@sos.la.gov](mailto:meg.casper@sos.la.gov)**

---

Aug. 28, 2015

## **Lessons Learned from Katrina Remembered by Secretary of State**

**BATON ROUGE, La.**—Ten years after Hurricane Katrina violently slammed into the Gulf Coast, leaving more than one million people displaced, Louisiana Secretary of State Tom Schedler joined his staff in remembering the storm’s aftermath and praising their collective efforts to support the state’s recovery. Schedler thanked his employees for pulling off an “election like no other” in New Orleans just months after the city was violently impacted by winds and floods. He also gave them credit for creating a model for emergency preparedness in the area of elections that now guides other states facing similar circumstances.

Hundreds of employees at the Secretary of State’s Office, under the direction of former Secretary of State Al Ater, conducted the 2006 Municipal Election in New Orleans under less than ideal conditions after Katrina pummeled New Orleans and many other parts of the state. Their experience in tackling the voting challenges, including large numbers of displaced citizens who were eligible to vote, would prove to be invaluable to other states years later including when Hurricane Sandy struck the East Coast just before the 2012 presidential election.

“When you think in terms of the number of mail ballots that were sent all across the country to make sure New Orleanian’s voices were heard in that election it was quite an accomplishment,” said Schedler. “In addition, we set up 60-plus mega-voting precincts because so many of our polling locations had been destroyed in the storm. Those sites included tents, generators and bottled water for commissioners. Meanwhile, we had dozens of staff members stuffed into a hotel ballroom manning scanners to count paper ballots,” recalled Schedler. “Despite these harsh and unfamiliar conditions, it was one of the most rewarding elections ever conducted in Louisiana. It was a testament to what dedicated people can do when the going gets tough, and I’m honored to work alongside many of them today.”

- more -

In light of Louisiana's experience, Secretary of State Tom Schedler was later tapped to co-chair the [National Association of Secretaries of State \(NASS\) Task Force on Emergency Preparedness for Elections](#), a bipartisan group with members from 24 states that produced recommendations on how states can better cope with holding elections in the aftermath of a disaster.

"No one ever wishes for a disaster to strike, but as public officials, our duty is to plan and prepare for them," Schedler notes. "Having experienced first-hand the effects that storms such as Rita and Katrina had on elections in Louisiana, the challenges are clear. States must have a good contingency plan in place to help deal with polling place changes, power outages, equipment failures, poll worker shortages and a whole list of nightmare scenarios that can disrupt voting on Election Day."

In 2013, the NASS task force reviewed state laws regarding elections and disaster preparedness and found that only a small minority required the development of an election emergency contingency plan by law. In addition to urging election officials to work more closely with state emergency management officials to address this shortcoming, the task force's general recommendations included the following:

- *Get ready to address the topic of postponement.* In 2013, only one-third of all states reported having a law that details the process by which an election may be suspended, delayed or postponed in the event of an emergency situation. In most states, the decision is made by the governor or chief state election official, or a combination of the two. A state of emergency usually must be declared before any election activities can be postponed.
- *Plan to keep the polls open.* Election officials need clear guidelines for managing polling place changes, as well as handling polling place power outages, poll worker shortages, long lines and paper ballot shortages. There should also be procedures in place for securing voting machines and election materials in emergency situations where there are evacuations and other potentially threatening conditions.
- *Be prepared to help enfranchise voters.* This advice is particularly true for voters affected by emergencies, either because they are first responders who are helping with disaster response efforts, or because they are displaced or injured citizens who may require alternative voting options due to disaster conditions. States that have dealt with major emergencies have also stressed the use of using existing absentee, mail and early voting procedures to facilitate voting in emergency situations.
- *Make a commitment to reaching people.* As Election Day approaches, communicating voting rules and polling place changes to voters affected by an emergency must be a top priority for state and local governments. Notifying voters via text messages on their mobile phones has proven to be effective in a number of emergency-stricken jurisdictions with elections underway. Finding ways to help election officials and emergency management personnel partner up to send joint communications can also be helpful.

-more-

In conjunction with observing the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with the staff at the Department of State, Secretary Schedler has also partnered with local author, Claire Boudreaux Bateman to preserve stories of heroism after the storm, through the eyes of Louisiana's children.

Bateman's children's book, "Call Me Hero" follows a dog named Hero throughout the Gulf Coast region as he finds his family after the storm. Secretary Schedler and Bateman are encouraging students to interview individuals in their communities who were impacted by Katrina. The student interviews will then be preserved at the Louisiana State Archives to honor the 10-year anniversary.

"Many students don't remember Katrina and its aftermath," said Bateman. "But they have heard stories about the storm and how their families overcame challenges and recovered. Hero allows adults to start a conversation with the younger generation and pass along their own stories of heroism and triumph. It's a positive way to remember otherwise tragic events."

"Archiving student's stories about Katrina's heroes is a great way to chronicle our history," said Schedler. "I look forward to reading their tales and making sure they're secure for others to enjoy decades from now."

For more information on "Call Me Hero" go to [www.clairebatemanbooks.com](http://www.clairebatemanbooks.com).

###