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AP Interview: Katrina lessons put to use in Ky.

By BRETT BARROQUERE - Associated Press Writer

LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- The acting head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency said Wednesday that lessons the department learned from its disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina are being put to use as Kentucky digs out from a deadly winter storm.

In a phone interview with The Associated Press, FEMA director Nancy Ward said the agency started coordinating with state officials early in the crisis instead of waiting for local officials to be overwhelmed.

The agency's image took a beating after the August 2005 hurricane that leveled New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The Department of Homeland Security's inspector general issued a report calling the agency's response slow and ineffective - echoing the charges of critics in the aftermath of the deadly hurricane.

"The biggest thing we learned from Katrina is we needed to engage early," Ward said. "Whatever it is they need, we can identify it quickly and be here on the ground."

Ward on Wednesday visited the town of Leitchfield in Grayson County, a part of western Kentucky where residents have struggled without power for a week after the ice storm that state officials say killed 27 people. Some of those areas are expected to be without power for more than a month.

On the trip, Ward toured some country roads lined with felled tree branches. Many rural roads have been cleared but residents are still dealing with freezing temperatures.

Ward, who oversaw the agency's response to the California wildfires before becoming acting director, met with local officials and heard concerns including the need for fuel for generators and heaters.

"This is large in scope and magnitude," Ward said. "There's nothing like seeing it on the ground, especially in those rural areas, where it is very hard to describe if you don't see it yourself."

Training and disaster response exercises after Katrina, combined with early communication, have been key in helping supply shelters and moving workers into areas where they can do the most good, Ward said.

The trip was part of the "unified coordination" between federal and state officials in response to the storm, Ward said. Talking early on during the storm allowed Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear to lay out his priorities of what the state needed from the federal government, Ward said.

"That alone is the single most impressive thing that I've seen since I've been here," Ward said.

FEMA has provided the state with use of communications trucks with satellite dishes and temporary cell phone towers to re-establish communication with hard hit areas of western Kentucky. The system has hit a few kinks, Ward said, but generally has worked well.

"We can always do things better," Ward said. "The situation with communications can always be better."

Public Service Commission spokesman Andrew Melnykovich says as of Wednesday, 142,500 utility customers who fall under the commission's jurisdiction were without power. That drops the total number of customers reported without power to 208,335, including 52,600 served by the Tennessee Valley Authority and 12,950 municipal utility customers. That's down from a high of around 769,000.