New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin unveiled a hurricane evacuation plan yesterday that embodies some of Katrina's fatal lessons, ruling out city shelters such as the Superdome and making it easier for residents to heed his orders to flee.

The thrust of the plan is to encourage people to leave the flood-prone metropolis before a storm and avoid a repeat of the Katrina aftermath, when as many as 100,000 residents resisted Nagin's call for mandatory evacuation.

"Read my lips: This is a plan for getting people out of the city," Nagin said at a news conference in New Orleans. "There will be no shelters of last resort."

The plan calls for buses, as well as Amtrak trains, to take frail or incapacitated residents to shelters upstate. People with pets would be allowed to board evacuation buses, and police would take extra precautions against looting to alleviate any fears that evacuating could mean exposing homes to thievery.

Authorities will not force anyone out of their homes, however, though anyone who ventures out after curfew could be arrested, Nagin warned.

Nagin, who is running for reelection, has come under fierce criticism for his role during the hurricane and its aftermath -- just as Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) and President Bush have, he often notes -- and yesterday's announcement was clearly meant to show that hurricane preparation in New Orleans has changed.

The mayor has been criticized for delaying the evacuation order before Katrina. But yesterday he said he would be ready to issue such an order when a hurricane of Category 2 strength or greater is approaching.

The plan came under immediate criticism from mayoral challenger Mitch Landrieu, the lieutenant governor.

"I'm concerned that it took the Mayor eight months to announce this plan," Landrieu said in a statement. "It's worth noting that this will be the Mayor's fifth hurricane season. In 2004, Hurricane Ivan's near miss exposed serious flaws with the city's plan for evacuation and shelter of last resort. These same issues haunted our city during Hurricane Katrina."

Nagin's announcement came as Senate investigators formally released a 750-page final report on the government response, "Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared," which enumerated failures at all levels of government before, during and after Katrina.
But it focused special attention on the challenge, recognized long before Katrina but never fully addressed, of evacuating an estimated 100,000 residents who would not have access to vehicles.

That failure constitutes "one of the most remarkable stories from this investigation," the report said. Local and state officials knew about the potential problem regarding residents without vehicles since 1994 and the federal government "neither monitored their planning nor offered assistance."

City officials, who had primary responsibility for removing residents, had a plan for people without vehicles, but no provisions for implementing it, according to the report.

"As Katrina approached, notwithstanding the city's evacuation plans on paper, the best solution New Orleans had for people without transportation was a private-citizen volunteer carpool initiative called Operation Brothers' Keepers and transit buses taking people -- not out of the city, but to the Superdome," the report said.

Before Katrina, some city buses were available to pick up residents, but finding drivers posed a problem, and many residents said they never saw an evacuation bus in their neighborhood.

The report also faulted the city for not allocating enough money and personnel for hurricane preparation, echoing some of Nagin's critics.

"The Office of Emergency Preparedness for New Orleans, long known to be among the nation's cities most vulnerable to a catastrophic hurricane, had a staff of only three," the report said, noting that turnover was a "serious problem" and that the police and fire departments, which are responsible for search and rescue, had a total of five boats.

Sadly, the effects of Katrina make it much easier for the city to prepare for another hurricane.

The population is about 200,000 now, or less than half of what it was before Katrina, and officials estimate that 10,000 would need help evacuating. Many of the city's neediest residents have not returned.

"This is a very mobile community," Nagin said. "It's not what we had pre-Katrina."