

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Ney, Vice-chairman Miller, ranking member Waters, and other subcommittee members, for this opportunity to speak with you about the challenges our communities on the Gulf Coast face following Hurricane Katrina. Volunteers of America Southeast serves people in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia, particularly those who are elderly and those with various disabilities. After Hurricane Katrina we became – by default, by necessity, and because it was the right thing to do – a disaster relief agency. We are an affiliate of Volunteers of America, which is a national, nonprofit, spiritually-based organization providing local human service programs and opportunities for individual and community involvement.

It is especially meaningful that you came to Gulfport to bring attention to the “on the ground” needs, and I encourage each of you to talk with displaced persons and visit the areas devastated by this storm. As we now know, Katrina was the largest natural disaster in the United States, killing an estimated 1,400 people and costing causing billion of dollars in damage.¹ The costs to evacuees, businesses, the economy, and society are of devastating proportions.

The Response to Katrina

The federal response to date has been adequate given the extreme nature of destruction and far reaching impacts. Katrina was larger than any government or any government agency, and far more destructive than almost anyone could have imagined. However, there have been implementation problems that have weakened the “on the

¹ http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/ms-word/TCR-AL122005_Katrina.doc

ground” effectiveness of the response. Reviewing different components of the response, we have observed that:

1. FEMA’s initial emergency payments to families and the American Red Cross’ aid to those in need have proven invaluable. However, there has been some confusion over who was eligible for these payments and what they can be used for, and many eligible people have had difficulty completing the application process.
2. The hotel voucher program to stabilize those who became homeless during the hurricane has also been an appropriate emergency and intermediate response given the incredibly limited nature of the housing stock in our region. However, FEMA has provided evacuees in these hotels with inconsistent and unclear information about deadlines for leaving and assistance available to help them find permanent housing. As a result, evacuees have faced delays in moving forward to rebuild their lives.
3. The partnership between FEMA and HUD that introduced the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program known as KDHAP is a model that should be in place for any future disaster. As a housing agency, HUD is in fact much better equipped than FEMA to operate a transitional housing program. However, HUD has not implemented KDHAP well. Creating a new program that is similar but not identical to Section 8 has resulted in widespread confusion. Evacuees would be better served if HUD had simply implemented KDHAP by issuing time-limited Section 8 vouchers.

4. Also extremely helpful early in the relief efforts was the relaxation of occupancy guidelines in existing subsidized housing programs such as HUD housing for the elderly and persons with disabilities; we were able to place evacuees almost immediately into vacant units for which they generally would not have qualified.

I don't believe anyone outside of the impacted areas truly understood the depth of the challenges our communities faced immediately following the storm and face today as we rebuild. I would like to share one non-governmental resource that proved critical and invaluable immediately following the storm—the overwhelming response of the faith-based communities throughout the impacted area and from across the United States. These mostly local, faith-based groups and churches, large and small, appeared only hours after the storm passed. They quickly assessed their own damages, mobilized their resources, and opened their remaining damaged sanctuaries and buildings to those in their communities who lost everything. They provided food, water, shelter, and comfort. They used their preexisting relationships and church community partners to meet the emergency needs, all without any governmental or other directive or financial assistance.

Volunteers of America Southeast was one of those faith groups. In the days following the storm with faith partnerships, we established eight relief sites and four warehouses in Mississippi and Alabama to distribute critical supplies and assist residents in stabilizing their physical homes. We also set up two free emergency medical clinics in the hardest hit cities and have treated over 20,000 people. To date, we have served over 70,000 people at our non-medical relief sites, utilized over 7,000 volunteers, and received

and distributed over \$10 million dollars of in-kind donations. Today we continue our efforts, now focusing on recovery and rebuilding. Our medical clinic, staffed solely by volunteer medical personnel, remains in operation and will until the need no longer exists. We continue to “muck” homes and assist homeowners in rehabilitating if possible. All of these efforts and work cost the federal and local governments nothing.

Again, the response of the faith community was and continues to be tremendous. Our country has seen what has been done by the faith community and our local, state and federal governments must embrace its work to resolve the issues now and to plan for the next natural disaster. The artificial wall between the faith community and the governmental community must be torn down to the extent that we can all work together to achieve our similar goals. Each must trust the other and see what each brings to the table.

I was impressed when the afternoon before the storm, Governor Riley of Alabama called Governor Barbour of Mississippi to offer his state’s resources. As state governments recognize and utilize one another’s resources, that same reciprocal philosophy should be extended to the faith community. Government must see the faith community as one of their greatest assets.

In deed, the faith community was the first responder to the needs of the community and will be among the last responders. Their calling is to a high standard! It is my hope that the Katrina experience will forever change all of us, particularly those faith groups and churches that were locked behind their own walls. As a result of Katrina, they will never rebuild those walls, not because of the physical floodwaters, but rather because of the flood of needs in their community. The numbers of nonprofits,

faith-based organizations, and volunteers have made a tremendous difference in the quality of life for thousands of people. As we move forward in rebuilding communities, we must look to the greatest resource that already exists and that is the faith community.

Next Steps In Rebuilding the Gulf Coast

We need government that knows the KISS principle. Keep it simple and smart!

1. It is simple and smart to embrace the faith community before a disaster and bring them to the table as a primary resource. Let me tell you this story. Volunteers of America was one of the first recipients of the President's Compassion Capital funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). We worked before the storm to build an alliance of faith groups all across the Gulf. Those partners were critical in responding to the needs immediately after Katrina. Eight months prior to Katrina, New Bethel Church in Biloxi was a recipient of \$10,000 of federal dollars which they used to build a commercial kitchen to feed the homeless. Less than 24 hours after Katrina made landfall, this church was feeding their entire community from that kitchen. They were the first responder when there was nobody else to fill that role, and it cost the taxpayers and governments very little – both overall and particularly in comparison to the return provided.
2. It is simple and smart to get the commercial boats back in service. In Bayou La Batre, we have approximately 20-40 commercial fishing boats in trees and in marshes and out of the water. Two weeks ago, Governor Riley committed that he

and the State of Alabama would get the boats back in the water if the Federal government did not. In order to bring this community back, we must assist it to regain the tools critical to its fishing industry. We need to do what it takes to get people back to work. That's smart.

3. Rebuilding needs to be simple and smart. It is vital for housing and businesses to be restored, but we don't need to rebuild where something can easily be destroyed again. These issues should be addressed through local planning and building codes. It is smart to look at the past to prevent a similar disaster from having the same impact.
4. It is simple and smart to keep people in motels on a voucher system when they have no place else to go. We must not put people on the street until without a place to live. As FEMA inherited the hotel program from the American Red Cross, court battles had to straighten out what the best plan would be for some 41,000 hotel rooms housing Katrina evacuees.² It is simple and smart not to fight this in court each month, just do the right thing.
5. It is simple and smart not to push all the people who needed housing before Katrina to the back of the line. Prior to the hurricane, the 2.4 million people residing along the Gulf³ were among the poorest communities in the nation, with limited affordable housing stock. In fact, 25% of the children in Mississippi lived

² http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20060103/news_1n3katrina.html

³ http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/hurricanes_tropical_storms/005672.html

below the federal poverty rate prior to Katrina⁴ and 34% of those in poverty who rent paid more than 50% of their income in rent.⁵ The data is similar for all of the affected areas across the Gulf region. This context is important in order to comprehend the vast pre-existing needs of the citizens both in the most impacted areas and also in the communities that are now hosting evacuees. Hurricane Katrina has shed a light on the depth of the disenfranchisement in our region. Our social systems were overburdened before the storm and now it is even worse. The needs were great before Katrina, and we must not forget those who have been waiting for housing assistance.

6. Housing is the foundation for any community. It is difficult at best to work where you can't live. Be smart - put as much funding as possible toward rapidly re-housing families in permanent housing. Cruise boats and FEMA trailers are intermediate solutions, but what happens when the next hurricane season starts? We need real single-family houses, real apartment complexes, and a real plan for getting people back into their communities. More funding is required to develop single family homes and rental units specifically for the elderly and disabled. Volunteers of America will be a player in developing all types of housing and is developing a housing manufacturing company to put people back to work while creating smart homes to meet the needs of people in the community.

⁴ <http://www.nccp.org/about.html>

⁵ <http://www.nlihc.org/research/lalihd/Mississippi.pdf>

We have experienced the greatest natural disasters in our country. The impact is bigger than government or governmental agencies. However, Katrina is not bigger than our faith, our values, our work ethics, our determination.....and no disaster is greater than our people coming together to work for the common good of all.

We all need hope.

Remember the simple nursery rhyme of Humpty Dumpty.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All of the Kings horsemen and all of the Kings men couldn't put Humpty together again. No king, President or Congress can put us back together. However, all of us working together can renew what seemed impossible by keeping it simple and smart and by learning from yesterday. That is the smartest way to work, together in faith—faith in one another and faith in the God we serve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We at Volunteers of America look forward to working closely with you, and with other federal, state, and local officials, as we rebuild the Gulf coast.