



Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition

Catholic Charities continues relief on Mississippi Gulf Coast

By Sheri L. Cox, Biloxi, Miss.

Catholic Charities agencies from the Province of Miami have been supplying disaster relief to residents along the Mississippi Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina hit the area Aug. 29. The following is an update of the activities of Catholic Charities personnel and volunteers.

The Office of Long-Term Disaster Recovery maintains a distribution warehouse at 425 Division St. in Biloxi. The warehouse is stocked daily with truckloads of donations from around the country and the Bay Area Food Bank. The warehouse has provided canned foods, infant and baby supplies, special cultural dietary foods, hygiene products, cleaning supplies and tools for cleanup. Clients can walk into the warehouse to receive needed supplies, or they can receive supplies through deliveries to their doors in the hardest-hit neighborhoods and through deliveries to other points of distribution including parish PODs and other community agencies.

The warehouse was originally staged at St. Mary Catholic Church in Woolmarket, Miss., but was moved to St. Louis Catholic Church in Biloxi Sept. 30 after the volunteers made an extensive cleanup effort. The volunteers who cleared the warehouse site came from the Province of Miami. In the process of moving to the new location, the project was able to divert 17 vanloads and 16 18-wheeler-loads of supplies to local parishes and agencies, including the Hope Crisis Network and the Salvation Army.

The warehouse operation has also provided more than 1,284 referrals for service from other state and national agencies as well as medical assistance and elder care. Deliveries were made door to door in Waveland, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Latimer, Biloxi, East Biloxi, Pearlinton, Kiln, Dedeaux, Long Beach, Gulfport, Pascagoula, D'Iberville, Gautier, Orange Grove and surrounding smaller communities.

As part of the long-term recovery plan, volunteers have assisted more than 40 families with cleaning up or gutting their homes, as well as debris removal. Volunteers continue this process daily while fully equipped with safety gear and tools that have been donated from the Archdiocese of Miami, the dioceses of Venice, Orlando, and Pensacola-Tallahassee, and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and numerous parishes in Wisconsin, Connecticut and New York, among the many contributors.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the Archdiocese of Seattle have all provided members of their professional staffs to assist in the administration of the disaster-recovery efforts.

These volunteer recovery-team members give more to the community than just their physical labor. They also share fellowship with the community. The volunteers listen tirelessly to the clients as they share their stories of great loss. They offer the comfort of caring about each person individually. The team members also help each other as they debrief the day's work each night at the volunteer center.

Volunteers have provided more than 34,080 hours of labor to this recovery effort. Teams have provided cleanup and debris removal service to more than 30 homes in Waveland, Biloxi, East Biloxi and D'Iberville. Volunteer teams from the University of Ohio at Dayton and Florida State University provided cleanup and debris removal for parishes and individual homes in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties.

To date the warehousing operation has served approximately 7,500 families in the lower six Mississippi counties by distributing more than 100 tons of food, water and supplies. The warehouse is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m.

Catholic Charities USA provided a \$3 million grant to the Office of Long-Term Disaster Recovery to be used specifically for the rebuilding of the lives in the lower six Mississippi counties. The funds will be used to provide assessments of homes to be repaired, repair or rebuild homes in cooperation with the other long-term recovery services and provide the needed supplies and equipment to return families to pre-hurricane status. Homeowners will apply for assistance through a case management process and will be evaluated on a need basis as well as a repair assessment.

Catholic Charities USA also put out a call for assistance in the form of volunteer administrative staff to help run operations in Biloxi until permanent staff can be hired, housed and trained. Catholic Charities offices in Seattle, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Connecticut flew staff members to Biloxi to assist in this process with more volunteer staff coming each week. The Province of Miami has also provided a great deal of support by sending Deacon Marcus Hepburn, Florida Catholic Conference emergency management specialist, to provide direct support and guidance to the project.

The Office of Long-Term Recovery is in the process of completing a needs assessment of each community in Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, Stone and George counties and preparing a disaster-readiness plan to meet the community's needs in future disasters. Projects planned in conjunction with this plan include ideas such as building a permanent warehouse in a rural northerly section of Harrison County to store generators, food, tools, emergency-response vehicles and communications equipment necessary to connect all the essential staff of the Diocese of Biloxi in times of crisis. Other identified needs include wireless Internet communication ability and strategically placed communication equipment.

The office also plans to offer training sessions for caseworkers, priests and other professionals who are assisting victims of this disaster. The disaster-recovery team and volunteers will also provide workshops for community members to answer questions on the long-term recovery process, understanding FEMA and insurance processes and the rebuilding process. The office is also working on publications that provide clients with tips for handling

common disaster-related issues such as FEMA applications, dealing with homeowners' insurance and assessing the damage to their homes.

Currently, the office receives approximately 200 phone calls and 130 e-mails daily offering volunteer assistance, donations and requests for cleanup and repair assistance. The volunteer professional staff from the various Catholic Charities are assisting in the scheduling, coordinating and responding to all.

What is long-term recovery?

Long-term recovery is the slow process of rebuilding lives. Typically areas affected by disaster move from active disaster response into long-term recovery within weeks of a disaster. One of the signs that a community is moving from disaster-relief efforts into long-term recovery is the restoration of clean drinking water through the affected area. Another common sign is the reduction in outside personnel providing the relief services as local agencies ramp up their operations to handle the long-term concerns.

Disasters typically have four phases, which include the preparedness stage in which state and local agencies plan for possible disasters, educate the public about safety issues and plan an emergency response to the disaster. The second phase of a disaster is the actual emergency and relief responses after a storm, when numerous volunteers and relief agencies come into the affected areas and set up relief sites. Federal, state, local, civic and faith-based organizations offer a variety of services to help with the immediate needs of the community. The third phase is the recovery phase, which can take many forms from cleanup to demolition to rebuilding. The fourth phase is called mitigation where the long-term recovery begins to take form, safety issues become primary and rebuilding efforts are planned and started. Partnerships are formed between all relief and local agencies to begin the planning and implementation of rebuilding efforts. It has been learned through numerous disasters that one agency alone can effect little change on the affected area, but working together these agencies can meet the financial and building needs of many in the community.

The Office of Long-Term Recovery has been involved in all phases of this current disaster. It has provided direct relief to the community and has begun the process of long-term planning and preparedness for the future. The objectives in the next 30 days include opening lines of communication with the other local and state agencies involved in long-term recovery, offering training and support to any agency involved in the process, developing and implementing the office's part of the long-term process and active involvement in rebuilding the community for at least two years, extending possibly to five years.

To volunteer to help with relief and recovery in Mississippi, please call Caroline Bush at 850-436-6410. Volunteers are strongly encouraged to register with Bush to maximize impact. Accommodations in Mississippi are still extremely limited.

Sheri Cox worked for the Pensacola regional office of Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida when she was assigned to lead the volunteer operations on the ground in Biloxi following Hurricane Katrina. She is now employed by the Diocese of Biloxi.

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