



Statement of Valerie Keller  
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Before the joint hearing of the House Committee on Homeland Security's  
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response  
And the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs'  
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

“Lessons Learned: Ensuring the Delivery of Donated Goods to Survivors of Catastrophes”

Washington, DC  
July 24, 2008

I would like to thank the chairpersons and the distinguished members of the committees for the opportunity to appear before you. I am Valerie Keller, CEO of Outreach Center, a nonprofit based in south-central Louisiana, and I serve as a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority's Housing Task Force and as co-chair of the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition and of the Louisiana Advocacy Coalition for Housing and Homelessness. We appreciate Congress' continued support and attention to Gulf Coast recovery and your commitment to looking critically at our national systems for response and recovery so that our country is better prepared to aid its citizens in future times of crisis.

Today, I share with you information on the current need for housing and supplies along the Gulf Coast following the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita almost three years ago, in the hopes of informing your analysis of how critically-needed supplies were not delivered to those who needed them and your efforts to prevent such unfortunate situations from occurring in future disasters.

This testimony focuses on three main points:

Our work helping families access housing and the supplies they need for self-sufficiency and our efforts working with FEMA and other federal/state agencies

The ongoing needs on the ground across Louisiana's still-suffering coast and specifically focusing on the oft-overlooked Hurricane Rita impacted region

The impact of the recent CNN story and the Congressional and LRA outreach directing long-needed supplies to help these families still struggling to rebuild and recover.

I will speak to those first two points first—our work providing services and the ongoing needs on the ground –to set the stage on why the recovery supplies we're discussing today were and are much-needed.

The Outreach Center is a grassroots nonprofit human services organization with a proven track record of delivering effective services to people in crisis. Founded in 1990 and serving eight (8) parishes, the Center utilizes a comprehensive services model designed to help people climb from rock-bottom to obtain safe housing, meaningful employment, optimal physical and mental health, and a sense of self-respect, hope and dignity. Its broad scope of services encompass a complete continuum of care that includes an extensive housing and case management program, licensed addiction and mental health treatment center, social enterprises, a women's and children's shelter, a day shelter, and a food and supply distribution center. In addition, the Center is now developing mixed-income housing and catalyzing urban revitalization.

The Outreach Center's comprehensive services with the help of families, extensive case management and supportive services to individuals and families in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina & Rita the Outreach Center established the Transitional Recovery Action Center for Katrina/Rita (TRACK) based on the best practice "housing first" model to help hundreds of displaced families find solutions and access to housing, transportation, employment, and supportive services – rebuilding and empowering one life at a time.

In addition to the distribution of supplies and services, we also established a national relief effort in the aftermath of the storms the Center coordinated the distribution of goods from international relief

ermath of the storms the Center coordinated the distribution of goods from international relief organizations around the world, businesses, and government agencies giving more than 800,000 pounds of food, personal care items and medical supplies valued at \$2 million to more than 6,000 evacuees. Displaced families unsure of where or how to begin rebuilding their shattered lives turned to the Outreach Center and got the help they needed.

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Since the storms even when other relief and emergency response efforts faded away, community-based nonprofits have continued to serve the overwhelming needs of their neighbors while scrapping together resources. Our case managers are still working one-on-one with displaced individuals and families to assess their needs and establish an action plan to address each need, including housing, employment, transportation, mental health, substance abuse, education/job skills training, in the case of legal services other impacted families. Since we have 29,2005 we have more than 500 that helps with their jobs in the impacted families. impacted August 29, 2005 August 29, provided 23,817 services including case management and assistance accessing housing, employment, transportation, government benefits to 1,045 households, 2,367 individuals.

Resources are scarce and our agency is currently leveraging local dollars with some funding from the Social Services Block Grant administered through the LA State Department of Social Services (DRS) Housing Grant and the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation Displaced Family and Rapid Re-housing Grant and the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation Displaced Family - Housing Assistance Fund. These funds will aid approximately 300 displaced families in the Hurricane Rita-impacted parishes and FEMA trailer parks to obtain rental and utility assistance for up to a year. Since 2005 we have been working with FEMA, HUD, state agencies and nonprofits to ensure that services are not duplicated for the same families and that gaps are filled as people exit transitional housing and try to secure permanent housing.

In our work with hurricane evacuees, we have helped to place many clients in permanent housing. Many of our clients have accessed HUD's Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program (KDHP) and Disaster Voucher Program (DVP) rental subsidies, part of which pays a portion of their rent, and incrementally pays less and less, leaving the evacuee to pay more and more. In our experience this program has unfortunately not been a long term solution for most hurricane impacted families, as they are still often unable to pay their rent at the increased market rates and thus are unable to maintain permanent housing and self-sufficiency.

Louisiana, like the rest of the nation, was facing an affordable housing crisis pre-Katrina and Rita; however, an entirely new housing crisis was created when the hurricanes devastated south Louisiana in the fall of 2005, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents. One of the biggest challenges facing evacuees was, and still is, securing safe and affordable housing for their families. While many families have since returned to their hometowns, those unable or unwilling to return to the hurricane-ravaged areas remain in the area and the impact on housing availability has been substantial. South central Louisiana, a region best known nationally for its Cajun food and Zydeco and Cajun music, was the area hardest hit by Hurricane Rita also served as host communities for people resettling after Hurricane Katrina.

In this region the rent for one and two bedroom units increased 30% since the storms and a minimum wage worker now has to work 73 hours per week to afford a one bedroom and 81 hours per week to be able to afford a two bedroom apartment for a family.

Although these storms took a tremendous toll on all in their path, low to moderate-income individuals were disproportionately affected, with the storms severely compounding problems

that already existed. Current needs assessments reveal the top issue for hurricane-impacted





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