

OPEN ARMS: ANALYZING THE ROLE AND NEEDS OF HOST COMMUNITIES  
IN THE WAKE OF MAJOR DISASTERS AND CATASTROPHIES

Testimony of Mayor Randy Roach  
Lake Charles, Louisiana  
December 3, 2007

Hurricane evacuations are nothing new to Southwest Louisiana. We have been in the sheltering business since 1957 when Hurricane Audrey struck Cameron Parish, our neighbor to the south, and killed over 500 people. The residents of Cameron who lived through that tragedy rarely have to be told to evacuate. They know what to do.

Even when tropical storms threaten our area we have been known to open shelters. The American Red Cross has been our ally in this endeavor. Without their help and assistance we would not be able to do what we do for the people who need help.

Shelters are very public operations. Most of the people who use shelters are those who cannot afford a place to stay or who cannot find a place to stay. They include the very young to the very old, those who are able bodied and those who are not. They need food, water, medical care and other essential items.

Our evacuation experience in connection with Hurricane Katrina began like most other events. We had sheltered around 900 people from New Orleans at our Civic Center two years before in response to Hurricane Ivan. That operation went very well and we were glad to be able to help once more.

Normally, a sheltering operation lasts for three days. Although we do our best to provide a comfortable shelter, there is very little privacy. People sleep on the bedding they bring or whatever we can provide in an open area. There are no private rooms. Most families stay together in a designated spot. And most people are more than ready to leave once the all clear is given.

Although our Hurricane Katrina sheltering operation began normally, it changed dramatically on day two when we realized what had happened to the City of New Orleans. Our Civic Center operation quickly grew from 900 people to over 2000. It eventually exceeded 3000. Before it was all over, our newspaper described the community response to the effort as one of our finest hours.

The following excerpts from The Rita Report, commissioned by the Louisiana Recovery Authority and researched by Dr. Michael Kurth and Dr. Daryl Burckel, followed by additional information concerning evacuees in Southwest Louisiana, describes what happened as we faced what at that time was the most powerful hurricane of the 2005 season.

*As state and federal officials struggled to cope with the unfolding disaster in New Orleans, the people of Southwest Louisiana embraced the Katrina victims, donating food and supplies, offering them jobs, and enrolling their children in local schools. Thus, as Hurricane Rita approached, the resources of Southwest Louisiana were already stretched thin, especially among the volunteer, non-profit and faith-based organizations that were engaged in helping the victims of Katrina. Thousands of Katrina evacuees had to be loaded on buses and re-evacuated to safety further north in order to comply with a mandatory evacuation of Southwest Louisiana as relief agencies turned around and prepared to deal with victims of a new disaster. Despite these challenges, state and local leaders worked with relief agencies and non-profit organizations to stage a successful evacuation of the Southwest region.*

*The Lake Charles Civic Center is located on the lake in downtown Lake Charles. It contains a 2,000 seat theater, a 7,500 seat coliseum, and an exhibition hall. After Hurricane Katrina it sheltered over 2,000 evacuees from the New Orleans area, but they had to re-evacuate as Hurricane Rita approached. The civic center sustained approximately \$4 million in damage to its roof and upper floors from Rita, yet despite the damage it remained open to anyone in need after the storm. The facility also had numerous events cancelled during the Katrina/Rita time period resulting in significant loss of income.*

Evacuee immediate needs included: shelter (which was established at the Civic Center and Burton Coliseum by the American Red Cross); food; beds; clothing; bathrooms/facilities for personal hygiene; laundry facilities; and accommodations for pets.

When it was apparent that evacuees would stay longer than a few days the following issues had to be addressed:

- Security
- Entertainment – (books, radios, portable TV's, puzzles, games, etc.)
- Medicine (needed to fill prescriptions and sometimes get new prescriptions and doctors and/or drug stores could not be contacted)
- Medical and counseling services
- Ways to contact families
- Money (Many evacuees could not access their bank accounts or did not have them. Credit cards were not always reliable because of bank closures in the New Orleans area)
- Transportation for a variety of services
- Legal assistance
- Access to government agencies (FEMA, Social Security, Welfare/food stamps, unemployment) and insurance agencies in order to apply for assistance and make claims.
- Babies would not wait to be born and nursery's had to be devised to care for these new arrivals separate and apart from the other evacuees.
- Many evacuees did not have identification or birth/marriage documents to apply for assistance so assistance in getting these documents was needed.

- Schools for students (books, supplies, uniforms or clothing)
- Jobs
- Even mail delivery.

Relief from community:

- Overwhelming amounts of clothing, food, toys and games, etc. were donated by the community. There were so many donations that a system for accepting and distributing the donations had to be developed.
- A local relief agency arranged to donate 1,000 mattresses
- Agencies, businesses, health care providers and counselors set up locations at the shelter to provide assistance.
- The City set up computer terminals so evacuees could apply for assistance, contact relatives, etc.
- Local industries and businesses provided volunteers to help with food preparation and service. Volunteers also helped with babysitting, general housekeeping, provided entertainment, etc.
- Churches provided transportation to services and non-denominational services were held at the shelter.
- The Chamber SWLA, SWLA Partnership for Economic Development, and State Department of Economic Development provided assistance to dislocated businesses by providing facilities, equipment, etc.
- Local officials – congressmen, senators, legislators – provided assistance in applying for FEMA assistance.
- Families volunteered to take care of persons with special circumstances in their own homes.
- A task force made up of local officials, non-profit agencies, businesses and industries was formed to coordinate efforts and meet needs of the evacuees.
  - A website “SWLA Cares” was developed to provide resources and contact info for evacuees and residents providing assistance.
  - United Way/American Press newspaper established community fund with donations received.

Our sheltering operation continued after Hurricane Rita. In fact it continued into December of 2005. We were one of the last cities in the state to close a sheltering operation

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### **Biggest Challenges Experienced:**

It was all a big challenge. It was also a very gratifying experience for everyone involved.

### Impact of Evacuee Migration on Social Services

When you care for people you take on an awesome responsibility. It is like having people come to stay at your house. Only you don't get a chance to make up an invitation list and you have no idea how long they will stay or what they will need once they get here.

The capacity of our local service organizations was stretched to the limit. The 211 volunteer agency number could not handle the influx of calls. Without a central point of contact, it was very difficult to match individual needs with a service provider. There was some duplication of services and gaps in the distribution of services. Many agencies were receiving goods, and we had to establish a central distribution warehouse to meet the needs of the population.

What worked well in Social Services:

In response to Hurricane Katrina we developed a community action network and website for support services. We developed a local Ministerial Alliance to coordinate faith based services; we developed a Calcasieu Long-term Recovery Group made up of area social service agencies utilizing the local United Way network of social service organizations.

Impact of Evacuee Migration on Health Care Facilities and the Health Care System  
Special Needs was an issue. Special Needs shelters were established on a limited basis.

We struggled to establish an informal but somewhat centralized system to utilize the resources of medical personnel that came in to assist and prop-up the local health care delivery system during the post-hurricane period (volunteer doctors, Lake Charles Medical Society, Special Needs shelters, rural/temporary clinics, etc.).

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Impact of Evacuee Migration on Local Government Utilization of Federal Programs

We now know that there are various federal resources available before, during and after catastrophic events. Unfortunately, at the time of hurricanes Katrina and Rita we were not fully aware of those resources. One suggestion would be to direct the regional offices for federal agencies that serve communities in Hurricane prone areas to initiate requests for assistance. It would work better if the locals did not have to ask for help.

Impact of Evacuee Migration on Local Government Budgets

For Hurricane Katrina – Sheltering Expense:

The City of Lake Charles requested and received re-imburement of \$444,393.00 for actual expenses incurred for security, labor costs, materials and supplies and equipment rental.

For Hurricane Rita – the City of Lake Charles spent \$125,000 for actual sheltering expenses incurred but has yet to be reimbursed.

For both events, the City requested payment for the use of our Civic Center - for a lease or for a loss of revenue due to cancellation of events – we requested from FEMA lease

reimbursement of the Civic Center for days evacuees used the rooms. That was denied and we have appealed.

The City was also denied reimbursement from FEMA for damage to the facility caused by a large influx of people. One reason for the denial was there was no opportunity to document the damage because after Hurricane Rita it was difficult to assess what was caused by the hurricane and the evacuees. Although we still disagree with that assessment it appears there is nothing we can do.

There should be a policy in place that allows for reimbursements to the facilities for the use of their shelters, loss of their revenues and expenses incurred.

That being said, if we had to do it all over again we would. Our only request is that we – local, state and federal agencies - resolve that next time we will be better prepared to provided the services needed to help those who need it most.