

Foundation for the Homeless and Other Providers Respond in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

By Annie Kovski

When crisis and tragedy strike, the ability to look on the brighter side is difficult. Lives are often ruined and urgent needs of all sorts arise. Hurricane Katrina's detrimental affect on the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama has made it the most expensive and destructive natural disaster in the history of the United States. It stole over 1,000 lives and robbed over a million people of their homes.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina) However, amongst the grief and gloom is a light at the end of this tunnel. Many evacuees were able to seek help and safety in nearby states. As one example, organizations all over Austin, TX opened their arms to as many people as possible; moreover, programs were created in hopes to be the soft spot for these people to land.

Foundation for the Homeless, in particular, was able to lend a helping hand. For over 15 years, Foundation for the Homeless has been able to help individuals in Austin, TX get back on their feet and on the road to success. They have developed four programs to assist families and individuals with shelter and other basic needs. These include the Feed My People Program in which breakfast is provided twice a week, in addition to showers, haircuts, clothing, and other personalized assistance. The Passages Program is a partnership among Foundation for the Homeless, The Salvation Army, Caritas of Austin, Austin Families, LifeWorks and SafePlace that provides long-term (up to 18 months) comprehensive case management to individuals and families residing in shelter programs including guest families of the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Passages assist in finding work, childcare, counseling, substance abuse and other mental health services, life skills classes and guidance in attaining self-sufficiency. The Interfaith Hospitality Network works with communities of faith to provide transitional housing, meals, case management and other services to families. For up to ninety days, families reside in congregational facilities that rotate, generally, on a weekly schedule.

In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a new program for evacuees patterned after the Interfaith Hospitality Network program was set-up through Sharon Lowe (pictured right), Coordinator for Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN)-Katrina. IHN-Katrina volunteers from more than 50 communities of faith are working with evacuees to help them find both transitional (less than 6 months) housing through donated housing resources, and longer-term housing through and the Red Cross/City of Austin-FEMA voucher processes. Volunteers have conducted intake interviews with evacuees to identify their needs, escorted evacuees



through the processes, helped them move-in and connected them with congregations willing to sponsor them in obtaining household goods, resources and services, including case management. Transitional housing offered to evacuees consists of free stand-alone and shared housing in churches, homes and apartments provided by volunteers of Foundation for the Homeless/IHN-Katrina. For longer term housing needs, the program helps evacuees utilize the Red Cross and City of Austin-FEMA voucher processes. Every Katrina evacuee is eligible for a one-month rent voucher (for the first month's rent) provided by the Red Cross regardless if they stayed in the Austin Convention Center.

The current understanding is that only evacuees that resided in the Convention Center at least one night qualify for the six-month City of Austin- FEMA rent voucher. This may change. Foundation for the Homeless/IHN-Katrina is working diligently in setting up support to find permanent housing but many people are only interested in transitional housing. Suzanne Steves, a Methodist Pastor and a new volunteer for Foundation for the Homeless (pictured right), remarks, " We're tired but still plugging along because it is just so gratifying to do something when there is so much need." As apart of the IHN-Katrina program, they also fully intend to continue a relationship with the people assisted, provide case management, and job support.



Austin First Seventh-Day Adventist Church is also working with Foundation for the Homeless/IHN-Katrina to help alleviate the situation. Pastor Travis Sager (pictured here with another volunteer), the area coordinator of First Seventh-Day Adventist Church is accommodating the evacuees by offering their youth camp, the Nameless Valley Ranch, for temporary housing. They turned their 1000-acre ranch in Leander, TX from vacant cabins to a full-blown shelter. There are kitchenettes, medical facilities, restrooms, showers, and plenty of space. The two sets of cabins available have a maximum capacity of 200 people. Sager intends for this camp to be temporary housing lasting three to four months, but he says they will be more than happy to extend the stay of evacuees if need be. The camp has also opened its doors to Rita evacuees, filling to capacity during the weekend of the storm, and now plans to take up to 30 families referred by Foundation for the Homeless/IHN-Katrina for up to three months.



Other homeless service providers have also been involved with the relief effort. For example, Project HELP (Homeless Education and Learning Program) is an Austin Independent School District (A.I.S.D.) program that serves the Austin, TX area throughout the year in assisting people in homeless situations. It serves to educate homeless youths by providing school supplies, transportation, and other services. Cathy Requejo, the project supervisor for Project HELP, has definitely felt the drastic increase in need since Hurricane Katrina hit. She recalls that in the year of 2004, over 3,000 people were touched by the Program HELP, and in dealing with Hurricane Katrina evacuees alone, she estimates that they assisted over 600 people within a one-month span. They provide opportunities like food and gas vouchers, bus passes, and school enrollment services. Requejo notes that there is absolutely no delay in school enrollment, but they are experiencing major challenges in reaching the need and demand for transportation and food vouchers. They are able to provide daily, continuous service by capitalizing on their wonderful volunteers.

These are just a few of the Austin-area homeless service provider organizations that stepped up to the challenge of Hurricane Katrina. Even today, things are still changing moment by moment. Mary Rychlik, the Homeless Service Coordinator for the City of Austin, comments, "This crisis has redefined the word fluid." These organizations have pulled from every resource necessary in order to accommodate the temporary homeless needs from outside our area in addition to the needs of those found here in Austin and Travis County. The challenges faced by both the evacuees and the organizations affected by Hurricane Katrina have been exhausting but also a true test of their limits and character.