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Lack of Cohesion Bedevils Recovery

Red Tape, Lapses in Planning Stall Relief

By Shankar Vedantam and Dean Starkman

Washington Post Staff Writers

Sunday, September 18, 2005; Page A01

Three weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck, red tape and poor planning have left thousands of evacuees without basic services, according to local and state officials, public policy experts and survivors themselves.

Hundreds of thousands of people from New Orleans and Gulf Coast communities have fled, sometimes to neighboring states and beyond, moving in with friends and family or into shelters, public housing and hotels funded by the Red Cross. With little guidance from federal and state governments -- and no single person or entity in charge of the overall operation -- cities and counties have been left on their own to find survivors homes, schools, jobs and health care. A patchwork of policies has resulted, causing relief agencies to sometimes work at cross-purposes.

President Bush has promised a range of new initiatives to help the evacuees, including \$5,000 grants to help the unemployed find jobs, a voucher program for students and more money for state Medicaid programs. But while Bush's promises of additional help have been welcomed, the initial efforts to provide for the evacuees has sometimes been disjointed, confusing and ineffective, local officials said:

- In Houston, some housing shelters have been located so far from the center of town that it has become difficult for evacuees to find jobs.
- In Mississippi, people waiting for promised housing in the form of mobile homes or trailers found themselves in a Catch-22 situation: Even as local officials said they were waiting for FEMA to provide the shelters, officials at the federal agency said they were waiting for local officials to provide the right locations.
- In Mobile, Ala., careful plans by school administrators to cope with a certain number of evacuee children from Mississippi and Louisiana were disrupted when a fax last week gave officials 48 hours' notice that hundreds of additional evacuees were on the way.
- Some services have not reached their targets: At the Dallas convention center free legal resources for evacuees were hardly being used, partly because no one had told survivors how to think through what their legal needs might be.
- Public assistance programs for evacuees are going to vary widely, depending on welfare policies in individual states, meaning that evacuees who happened to be transported to one state are likely to receive very different benefits than those in others.

"I don't see much evidence of overall planning and guidance," said Richard Murray, a public policy expert in Houston, which is hosting thousands of evacuees.

In an e-mail, Murray, who is director of the University of Houston's Center for Public Policy, wrote: "Couple a multi-state disaster of Katrina's magnitude, (including some of the poorer and less well-governed states in the union), add on a dysfunctional federal bureaucracy that had deteriorated in recent years, and a chief executive whose motto seemed to be, until yesterday, the buck stops there, and we get a helluva mess."

As the effort evolves, increasing numbers of federal agencies are getting involved, and officials are hopeful of improved performance. FEMA, which is in charge of organizing immediate assistance in disasters, has set up a housing command. The Department of Education is focused on schooling, the Environmental Protection Agency on making sure evacuated areas are safe to return to, while the Department of Health and Human Services handles health care.

Bush said in a speech to the nation Thursday that Americans "have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency." In his radio address



Joan Buckley, 63, of New Orleans Parish, waits at a shelter in Baton Rouge, La. Some local officials say they need better guidance from states and Washington. (By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)



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yesterday, the president said that more than 500,000 evacuee families had received emergency help to pay for clothing, food and other essentials. "They will receive broader help in the future," he promised, adding that states that have provided schooling and health care to displaced people will be reimbursed by the federal government.

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Hurricane Katrina brought unprecedented destruction to the Gulf Coast. View the Post's multimedia coverage of the disaster. (Spencer Platt - Getty Images)

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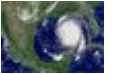
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What complicates the overall relief effort is the fact that officials still lack hard answers to even the most basic questions about displaced survivors: Exactly how many are there, and where are they located? State officials in Louisiana and Mississippi initially guessed that more than 1 million people were homeless, but no one is really sure, and efforts to develop a more accurate tally have been hampered by logistical problems.

In his Thursday speech, Bush implored evacuees to call the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the Red Cross to register themselves, because "we need to know who you are." Bush was referring to people such as Steve Lacourt, whose mobile home in Pass Christian, Miss., washed away.

Lacourt has tried to do just what the president asked -- for more than a week. One night, the 42-year-old mechanic said, he drove to a highway overpass, where his cell phone got some reception, and speed-dialed the toll-free numbers for FEMA and the Red Cross for six hours straight, from 8 in the evening until 2 in the morning.

He could not get through.

Survivors such as Louise Dilsenroth and Sandra Brent, who has diabetes, have had similar problems in Mississippi. The women spent hours last week waiting in line to get a number that would allow them to enter a Red Cross facility to speak with an official. Brent said she had spent three days so far, trying to get a number. She has not had access to insulin since the hurricane hit.

Lacourt, the mechanic, said he has used up two tanks of gas driving around the region looking for housing assistance. A rumor of help in Laplace, La., turned out to be false. In Ocean Springs, Miss., FEMA officials working out of a former Kmart gave him FEMA's toll-free number again.

"That's completely useless," he said he told them.

"That's all we can do," he said he was told.

Other missteps have spilled into the relief program: FEMA chartered cruise ships, at a cost of around \$200 million, to house evacuees -- but many survivors refused to board, partly because living on a ship would have made it hard to find jobs and schooling. After leaving thousands of berths empty, FEMA is housing relief workers on them. Last week, after New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin jubilantly announced that Children's Hospital was reopening immediately, he was contradicted a short while later by a hospital official.

"There was one blitz where FEMA was giving debit cards, which was not a good idea because it started rioting in Houston," said Dallas Mayor Laura Miller, who has criticized the lack of guidance and help from state and federal authorities. Miller said her city had been relying on private charity to help thousands of evacuees but warned that it could not last.

"When Congress approves \$12 billion in two to three days of the hurricane, and two weeks later, none of the communities whose population has swollen by 25,000 has received any of that money, you have to wonder what is going on," she said. "Is it a bureaucratic problem? It sounds like it is."

Bruce Hunter of the American Association of School Administrators, who has heard from numerous school superintendents in the hardest-hit states, said many school districts in Louisiana and neighboring states are struggling to cope with the tide of evacuees.



Joan Buckley, 63, of New Orleans Parish, waits at a shelter in Baton Rouge, La. Some local officials say they need better guidance from states and Washington. (By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)



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"The federal government really hasn't provided much of anything," he said.

Harold Dodge, superintendent of schools in Mobile County, Ala., said he had tried to convey to state and federal officials the challenges he faced after nearly a thousand evacuee children from Mississippi appeared in Mobile.

Alabama requires four years of English, math and science to meet the state graduation standards. Mississippi requires only three years. Dodge also worried about being stigmatized by federal authorities for any drop in test scores. The superintendent said a lack of planning and foresight had left him dealing with constantly changing scenarios.

"I don't know whether someone sitting way up there is saying let's disperse them in an orderly fashion," he said of the evacuees.

"This is one of the few times I couldn't get my arms around an issue," he said. "Every time I thought I had my arms around it, it got away from us. We are in a constant state of flux."

In Houston, now home to about 125,000 evacuees in shelters, private homes and subsidized apartments, the understanding from the start was that the city and its suburbs were on their own in dealing with evacuees.

Local leaders used their own buses, convention center and sports stadium, along with shelters, hotels and private apartments, to serve evacuees as they navigated a thicket of applications for traditional federal benefits, from food stamps to unemployment insurance.

But many evacuees now find themselves in apartment complexes at remote edges of the city, in no man's lands near the airport or in industrial parks near oil refineries. They are without cars, or constantly getting lost, in one of America's most car-dependent cities.

Mary Joseph, 63, a custodian from Violet, La., in a new apartment in Northland Woods off Beltway 8, is 17 miles from downtown: "We spend \$30 for gas every few days, and we don't know where we are going."

Dallas Mayor Miller said she believed Bush understood the disconnect between government intentions and the execution of the relief efforts.

"George Bush stepped up and said, 'We didn't handle this well, and we are going to fix it,' and I believe that," she said. "I hope the people under him can do him justice."

Starkman reported from Mississippi, Vedantam from Washington. Staff writers Evelyn Nieves in Mississippi, Lisa Rein in Houston, Sylvia Moreno in Austin, Kevin Merida in Dallas, Ceci Connolly in New Orleans and Peter Slevin in Chicago contributed to this report.

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