



# Hurricane Katrina Deployment

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*The images on TV were haunting and I felt the need to do something. The preparation for this deployment was nearly as intense as the work itself. I left work at the school system, my family, my animals, and my clients and my regular life... The following is a detailed account of my deployment experience that I want to share with other volunteers.*

## Alert

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast states, which was followed by a levee break at Lake Pontchartrain. This caused the largest natural disaster this country has sustained. Over 1.5 million people were left homeless.

Louisiana requested resources from Maryland (MD) through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (e.g., personnel, equipment, supplies). The MD Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) partnered with the MD Defense Force and American Red Cross. Together, these organizations sought to deploy volunteer physicians, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, and behavioral health professionals.

## Pre-Deployment

### Activation Notification

I received my first email regarding deployment on August 30. DHMH was calling upon persons trained in disaster services. Maybe it's just helping others, helping God, or having a social conscience, but I felt that I could not live with myself if I did not do something! I believe this is what we do, what we are trained to do. I responded to the activation notification.

### Pack Your Deployment Go Kit

We were given a rather lengthy list of supplies to bring, not just your standard toiletries and summer clothes, but hurricane-related disaster necessities. One of my friends from work offered to help me obtain the necessary items. Others offered their support. Within hours I acquired bottled water, bug spray wipes, hand lotion, waterless soap, tissues, and even toilet paper.

The following week I spent my free time faxing required forms to the MD Responds MRC (at that time, called the *Maryland Health Care Professional Volunteer Corps*) and the Red Cross. These forms were related to the following:

- Hepatitis shots
- CPR certification
- Licenses – State of Maryland social work license
- Trainings – Proof of disaster trainings
- Work situation- as I did get hassled for leaving!

The Saturday night before I left there was a surprise birthday party that my husband and daughter coordinated. It was very sneaky of them. Unknown to me at the time was that there was a big party scheduled for September 11, my actual birthday. However, I would be in Baton Rouge at that time, so they

scrambled to put together the earlier one. It was a great goodbye party. All of my friends brought toys for the children of Katrina. My oldest children called to wish me well and said, "Do good work down there." We are a close family and I felt I needed their "OK."

## **Deployment**

Early Sunday morning on September 11, my 50th birthday, I was at Baltimore Washington International (BWI) airport. I was told to keep my badge on from the moment I entered BWI airport. When I was at the boarding gate, two ladies from Continental airlines asked me lots of questions about my new assignment as they, too, wanted to help. I gave them phone numbers for people who were preparing to accept evacuees. I felt then that I really did start working.

### **Check in**

At the airport in "Loosiana," several of us shared a shuttle bus. We arrived at headquarters, which was setup in an old Wal-Mart. The Red Cross welcomed all of us and gave me a "beautiful" vest to wear that said "Disaster Services." Everyone had one. I love clothes, but this was not so attractive, nor flattering!

### **Orientation**

Orientation at Baton Rouge lasted all day. By late afternoon we were sent to a staff shelter at one of the local churches and told report back at 8 a.m. That Sunday night I celebrated my birthday with other volunteers, nurses, mental health professionals, and food service people.

We spent all night asking, "Where are you from? What do you do? Have you ever served before?" People were there from all over the country, actually the world. One of the people on my mental health team was a neuropsychologist from Canada. One of the cooks at the Cajundome was from Puerto Rico.

Soon I was given my team and my placement. My placement was the Cajundome – the basketball/sports/concert arena of the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, pronounced "Laffy-et."

### **Facilities**

The layout of the Cajundome was efficient, well-run, safe, and so sad. Outside there was registration, police, military, port-a-potties, and, of course, water bottles. The temperature was in the 90s and everyone needed water. A lot of guns were confiscated, and drugs found. People tried to hide drugs in the port-a-potties and the port-a-potties broke.

Inside, it looked like an airport. There were metal detectors. Paging of people was constant.

Areas were set up for information, referrals, photo identification badges, chaplain services, mental health services, nursing services, diabetes clinic, physical health, and emergency medicine. The basketball court became the food stations and there were multiple areas to obtain water bottles, soap, lip balm, sunscreen, bug spray, coloring books, first aid ointment, and diaper rash creams. The areas where one would buy snacks was turned into a no-pay store, where they gave out diapers and wipes, shampoo, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and personal items.

There were community areas set up for TV, coloring books, child care centers and even a staff room. There was a child care center on the lower level, and security on the upper level.

### **Operations**

There were cots, linens, and tired homeless people, depressed and stressed out. People everywhere. Parents were too bummed out to supervise their children. Children were so scared. There were people who could not speak English too.

The mental health team that I served on was composed of a social worker and a neuropsychologist. They gave us a van and we all worked the same shift. Our scheduled hours were 3-11 p.m. I suppose that happened once or twice. As new teams were coming in and new shelters opening up, we all put in more hours, lots of them. I also worked with a few others; we were all social workers, so we bonded easily.

Once, a nurse standing behind me received a page and asked if I could help. We ran through two buildings to find a lady who was to be my first client. She appeared to be having an anxiety attack. The nurse and I spoke with her for a few minutes, a quick interview. She seemed less tense while we spoke. We put her in a wheelchair to bring her to the physical health station. The leg part was broken, so I had to essentially hold her legs up and walk backwards again through the two buildings. At the physical health station, the nurses asked questions about her health, meds, and any psychiatric situations. She stated they had just changed her blood pressure medicine; she felt dizzy. I continued to stay right next to her, holding her hand. The medical personnel took her blood pressure. They decided it was too high and called 911.

I spent much of my time with the children. They were traumatized, but resilient. I brought lots of prizes, stickers, and a puzzle map. We colored and face-painted and told stories. I heard about a lot of helicopter rescues and boat rescues and not so good rescues. Some told alligator stories. They told me about their families and homes and dolls and toys and trucks and the rain and the water and the waves. The families came in groups and stayed together as best as possible. One family reunited right in front of us. I got teary-eyed, a lot.

The addicts were one of the hardest groups to work with because they would detox, then go out, get high, come back to the shelter, and start to detox again. They set up a methadone clinic for these folks. You could see that they were really suffering.

A few times, I was asked to go in the staff room and pack up food for the folks working all night. One night, they asked me to go in to the staff room to pack up about six plates of dinners for the "all-nighters." Any other food and a Jewish mom is OK, but this was way different. Don't ask the Jewish girl to pack up "loosianna" food; it's stinky, spicy, and all seafood. Jambalaya is shrimp, crabs, crawl-daddies, and who knows what else. I never saw food like this before. However, everyone loved it!

The staff room was always bubbling with stories about volunteers' regular everyday lives compared to this new life in the Cajundome. The military people had the best stories; they always found something humorous. Our social work stories were often sad, as you might imagine.

There were approximately 7,000 people at the beginning. When I left they were down to 1,000. Two weeks later, when Hurricane Rita came, they evacuated and they were down to 200 people. Before this deployment, I never had a caseload over 100 persons; now we were in the thousands. I will never complain about my caseload again!

## **Post Deployment**

Overall, it was very intense work. Thank God I went. My family was OK. I did not lose my job. My Coordinator asked me to present at our staff meeting last month. Red Cross threw us a great party and so did the Governor. I would encourage everyone to help in whatever capacity you can.