

Insights on Hurricane Katrina Relief Efforts

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Over the next several weeks, the Sagamore Institute for Policy Research (SIPR) will share information and insights from our researchers and partners on Hurricane Katrina - and on how Americans are responding to the disaster.

Commentary

After Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, SIPR researchers and partners took action. One created a relief organization for affected children. Another visited Mississippi cities, exploring redevelopment options. And a third shared insights on the crisis.

Creating a relief organization

Associate Fellow Lenore Ealy is putting her nonprofit expertise to work in the form of Project K.I.D. - Responding to Kids in Devastation. This new nonprofit organization is a collaborative effort with Daphne United Methodist Church, and its sole purpose is to deliver child-care services in the areas most affected by Katrina. Based in Fairhope, Alabama, Project K.I.D. brings together individuals, relief organizations, businesses, and government agencies to collect supplies, organize volunteers, coordinate transportation into and out of devastated areas, and ensure that parents and children are provided safe, reliable, and much-needed child care. To learn more about Project K.I.D. and/or to contribute to this worthy cause, visit www.project-kid.org.

Visiting affected cities

In Katrina's aftermath, Senior Fellow Scott Truex traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, where he participated in a gathering aimed at exploring opportunities for rebuilding. The program took place under the auspices of Mission Mississippi, a nonprofit organization that predates Hurricane Katrina. Mission Mississippi brings together faith-based organizations (FBOs) of all sorts to serve those in need. Truex is well-suited for this effort. In May 2005, Truex and Associate Fellow Lenore Ealy led a team of experts in economic development, philanthropy and land design on an analysis and evaluation of Florida's response to the devastating hurricanes of 2004. SIPR evaluated the effectiveness of Florida's programs and identified areas where lead-relief organizations such as Volunteer Florida Foundation could be even more efficient and effective in future years when similar needs arise. The following are Truex's impressions of Katrina's aftermath.

1. How did the Florida study prepare you for this effort? Are the Katrina states applying any lessons from Florida 2004?

SCOTT TRUEX: Based on what we learned in our Florida study, I offered some insights on how the post-disaster process usually progresses: There is the initial emergency response; short-term relief efforts, such as clearing roads and power lines; and finally, long-term recovery. Depending on where you visit, they are still in Phase One and Phase Two.

That's one reason why I recommended the Mission Mississippi team to put together long-term recovery committees at the county level. That way, Mission Mississippi members can plug into the needs quickly and more efficiently. It would really help the entire Mission Mississippi network to work more effectively in getting resources to those in need. This has to be a county-by-county effort, in my view, because the needs are so different: Some counties need housing, some need child care, some need schools rebuilt, some need job training programs.

This will be a long process. It will go on once the federal government and the media leave. This is where the Katrina states can learn from Florida. Volunteer Florida Foundation (VFF) has done a good job targeting funding to where it can have the greatest impact. VFF, which manages the entire relief fund in Florida, is advising Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana on how to create a coordinating agency for each state to organize and filter relief funds and assistance. It's been more than a year since Florida weathered those hurricanes, and VFF is still coordinating the relief.

2. What is the sense of people on the ground?

SCOTT TRUEX: I was encouraged by the spirit of cooperation among the Mission Mississippi team. I was encouraged by what I saw and by what I heard local FBOs and other philanthropies were doing: Before government was moving, these groups were rising up to meet the needs and address the problems of their neighbors.

Even so, the sense I got from the evacuees—most of Mississippi's evacuees are from the Louisiana coast—was still a sense of shock.

3. Are there any applicable lessons from Florida 2004, or is Katrina orders of magnitude worse?

SCOTT TRUEx: Well, the initial problem is worse with Katrina because of the great displacement of people. But the long-term challenge after Katrina will be very similar to Florida 2004. Housing costs and job loss are going to be major problems for the Katrina states, just as they were and are in Florida. And this is truly a regional challenge now: We have Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana with thousands of homes and service-industry jobs gone. Many of the affected communities were already beset by poverty.

In our response, we have to do what's in the best interests of those who have been displaced. In some cases, that may mean a temporary move. After all, people have been ordered to leave their homes. But we need to ask, "Is moving thousands of people out of the region a good idea?"

4. Since we cannot control nature, is there a solution policymakers, urban planners and communities can develop to begin to limit the human and economic costs of these storms?

New Orleans was once essentially an island. We drained wetlands and pumped water out of the city to keep it connected to the land. Does that make sense? We have to start paying attention to the implications of development.

Offering insight

Don Eberly, who has partnered with SIPR President Jay Hein on civil-society issues, is a key member of the State Department's Tsunami Reconstruction Task Force. He offers his insights on Katrina relief below.

1. What makes it effective for a private citizen to donate money or material contributions to a disaster like this?

DON EBERLY: Much like the tsunami which hit Asia earlier this year, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath display the indispensable role increasingly played by citizens and private aid. The foremost issue is adequate capacity to respond. The devastation is overwhelming, quite literally, because the most urgent and immediate needs cannot be met by all of the governments combined. The greatest immediate need is to meet core humanitarian concerns, including rescuing those still trapped, providing food, water and emergency health care. Only the combined efforts of governments, volunteers and NGOs can begin to cover the scope of human need.

No less important in the response of private citizens is the message it sends to a nation that occasional entertains doubts about the health of its basic civic creed. A massive outpouring of private generosity sends a powerful message to all—from hurricane victims to those watching events on television from a distance—that America's civic traditions and humanitarian impulses are alive and well. Private initiative serves the public purpose of building a strong and hopeful nation.

2. Are there some comparisons you can make between how Americans and other countries have responded to past U.S. emergencies, like the tsunami relief efforts, and how they're responding to our current situation?

DON EBERLY: There are powerful new trends at work in the world that were brought to light during the tsunami response; what I would call the awakening of citizenship. In the tsunami case, major countries that never before had much of a pattern of private giving suddenly discovered that their own citizens contributed hundreds of millions of dollars. In the case of the Katrina, we may witness for the first time the international community coming to the aid of gulf coast residents who suddenly find themselves coping with primitive Third World conditions. Clearly, the awakening has much to do with the power of concentrated television coverage and other electronic means for bringing stories of suffering to the world's attention; it also has a lot to do with remarkable power of web-based fundraising, which is spontaneous, low-cost and very effective in rapidly moving resources toward the problem.

3. What connection do you see between our current situation and your advocacy of the "third way"?

DON EBERLY: The "third way" means that the monopoly that many public agencies, domestic and international, once had in a variety of development and humanitarian activities, simply no longer exists. In the case of tsunami, public agencies are playing comparatively minor roles to NGOs and businesses. That the private sector contributed \$1.5 billion (over twice the public expenditure made available by Congress) only tells part of the story. Corporations and business networks in the region fully mobilized their operating units, with employees, suppliers, customers helping out on anything from IT and communications needs, building supply chain systems, supplying shipping and logistics support, and rapid infrastructure repair. The line between what governments have traditionally done and what private entities and individuals do is increasingly blurring, all to the benefit of the needy and suffering among us. And this will require new models of public-private partnering.

How you can help

To contribute to the relief efforts, we encourage you to visit www.redcross.org or www.bushclintonkatrinafund.org.