

Tribute to Corrections Personnel of the Gulf Coast

By Michael Kelly



A probation and parole officer (in black) assists an elderly woman who was rescued from Katrina's floodwaters.



A headline from *The Times-Picayune* warns of the hurricane's fate.



Louisiana State Penitentiary medical staff evaluate female prisoners from Orleans Parish Prison as they arrive. Inmates were tired, hungry and some were wet when they arrived.

Natural disasters cut deeply and leave lasting impressions. Eighteen months ago, the Gulf Coast of the United States was slammed by two hurricanes whose impact is still being calculated today. On the morning of Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina moved off of the Gulf of Mexico and made landfall, bringing sustained winds of 145 miles per hour and a 28-foot storm surge that devastated parts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Katrina's fury caused catastrophic damage along its path. In Mississippi, almost every building within a half-mile of the coastline was damaged or destroyed. Near Biloxi and Gulfport, some neighborhoods were completely wiped out. Casino barges were washed hundreds of yards inland. In New Orleans, several levees broke open or collapsed, and water from Lake Pontchartrain and area canals flooded 80 percent of the city.

A few weeks later, Hurricane Rita hit the region, which was still recovering from Katrina, causing significant damage in Louisiana before moving through parts of Texas. In Texas, Beaumont and Port Arthur sustained extensive damage, and many private homes and businesses were destroyed. Thousands of people who fled or were displaced by Katrina found themselves scrambling for their lives again.

Going Above and Beyond

Katrina and Rita killed about 2,000 people and caused more than \$90 billion in damage. But when disaster strikes, it often brings out the best in people. The death toll would have been much higher were it not for the heroic actions of so many people before and after the hurricanes, including corrections personnel from all over the affected regions. Besides getting thousands of inmates out of harm's way, correctional staff rescued survivors from rising floodwaters, cleared roads for emergency vehicles, provided security and law enforcement, coordinated food banks, and distributed other emergency relief supplies.

The North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents recognized the entire staff of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections for "uncommon valor during the Katrina Crisis" and bestowed upon them its National Medal of Valor Award, explaining that it would be impossible to single out any one individual. The department's secretary, Richard Stalder, agreed and said his employees are "by every standard, models of excellence in public service."

Lt. Col. John Smith, a correctional officer from Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, spent about 40 straight hours in New Orleans immediately following Katrina. Originally assigned to help control inmates in the flooded city, Smith also provided food and water to city residents who were forced from their cars and homes as the water continued to rise. Smith was humble about the role he played in New Orleans. "I was a very small part of a huge operation that involved more people than anybody can list. I can only hope that the few people I was able to help are OK," he said.



A probation and parole officer secures the area where inmates were staged until transportation caravans could pick them up.



Probation and parole officers encountered many heartbreaking scenes. Here, a woman was trying to locate water for her child and find a location where she could be evacuated.

Simon Gonsoulin, deputy secretary of youth services for the Louisiana Office of Youth Development, said that staff left their own homes and families to evacuate and care for the youths in the agency's custody. "They made the whole operation appear effortless ... when in fact, it took hard work, long hours and dedication," he said.

Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner Christopher B. Epps believes that his department's handling of the Katrina disaster shows a spirit among his entire staff that is "a fine example to hold up to the world." The department's employees "were hit hard ... but they were determined not to let it keep them from getting up and embarking on a new beginning," he said. Epps has striking memories of Hurricane Katrina, including seeing families with small children walking among the rubble of ruined homes, looking for anything that might have been spared. However, Epps said that he is an eternal optimist and that he was

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Brad Livingston
Executive Director
Texas Department of Criminal Justice



Correctional employees helped to collect and sort hurricane relief supplies.



Employees and students from the TYC Al Price facility in Beaumont, Texas

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Lt. Col. John Smith
Dixon Correctional Institute
Jackson, La.



A Louisiana State Penitentiary employee hands clean clothes to a female inmate.



Probation and parole officers relax after finishing a 12-hour shift providing security for the New Orleans Fire Department and other volunteers. Officers either rode along on the trucks or drove their cars in ahead of the trucks.

“inspired by the compassion of others who had lost everything but were still willing to help their fellow victims.”

Brad Livingston, executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, said that the most memorable aspect of hurricanes Katrina and Rita is the performance of his department’s employees during the crisis. Despite many facing personal tragedy, “the need for staff to perform above and beyond the call of duty was met in an extraordinary way,” he said. Livingston said the department’s response “has further demonstrated that our staff can come together to accomplish any goal, even when facing the most difficult situations.”

Dwight Harris, executive director of the Texas Youth Commission, expressed deep appreciation for his staff and for their actions during the hurricanes. “Without any mandate, and without any hesitation, our people — across all of Texas — reached out to help those in need,” he said. “Virtually no facility or group of employees and youth in the entire agency ... missed the opportunity to volunteer a helping hand.”

A Silver Lining

Memories of Katrina and Rita will haunt many forever. The unprecedented destruction scarred much of the Gulf Coast region, killing and uprooting thousands of lives. However, many in corrections optimistically see a silver lining behind the hurricanes of 2005. Gonsoulin’s youth services department had been an independent entity only since 2004. “But we matured very quickly when we were tested by events that none of us had experienced before. ... I’m very proud of our staff’s actions and attitude toward our work and the youth we serve,” he said.

Epps sees the events as a test of character and believes that during and after the storms, “[department] employees learned more about strength, hope, unity, fortitude and most of all, love. ... Their steadfast character inspires me to hold fast daily,” he said. Harris said, “The experience reinforced what we already knew—that [the Texas Youth Commission] is not only a team but a family and that our employees are willing to go the extra mile for people in need.”

Michael Kelly is an associate editor for the American Correctional Association.