

Inaction would have spelled disaster for the residents of Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina

**By RON MOOREFIELD
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Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series.

It's no longer front page news, it doesn't lead the evening TV and radio news reports and it's no longer the center of our concern even though we still hear the appeals for Hurricane Katrina relief.

But for those people living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Katrina's devastation makes life a daily struggle. Nothing is as it was.

Nothing I had seen on TV or in the newspapers prepared me for the devastation and heartache I experienced when I arrived in Biloxi, Miss. As a member of the EMA Communications Emergency Response Team (CERT), I was deployed in September to work as a disaster assistance employee (DAE) in FEMA's Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

The storm's fury and power first became evident as we crossed from Alabama into Mississippi on our drive from FEMA's staging center in Atlanta. An I-10 four-lane bridge had been reduced to one lane in each direction due to storm damage.

As we made our way into Biloxi, the size of the disaster became even more evident as we saw houses that had been destroyed, piles of debris, abandoned cars that had been flooded and numerous roofs covered with blue tarpaulins. And it was strange to see police and other emergency vehicles that bore emblems from agencies outside Mississippi such as the Springfield, Ohio Police; Ohio State Highway Patrol; Virginia State Police; Henrico County in Kentucky; Fairfax

County, Va. and Maryland. It was only later that we learned that they were there because most of the emergency vehicles in this region were either destroyed or severely damaged in the storm.

After reporting to the Area Field Office (AFO), I became one of 50 community relations (CR) personnel who would go out into communities to help the people in the six Mississippi counties declared disaster areas. Our teams included other CERT members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, volunteer firefighters and Amateur Radio Operators (HAMS) and local Vietnamese community who served both as translators when needed and as CR personnel.

Our task was to walk the communities there to make certain the residents had registered with FEMA for both financial and housing assistance and knew where they could get water, ice and MREs (Meals-Ready-To-Eat).

In addition, we were to identify any people with special needs who would be priorities for any kind of assistance and bring to FEMA area management any issues that we could not resolve. Our days ran from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week--not counting travel time, which could add an hour each way. After Christmas, time was reduced to 10-hour days, six days a week.

I was assigned to the six-person unit whose task was to cover Pearl River County 65 miles to the north of Biloxi. Most of the damage was from mini-tornados and wind driven rain that got under the roofs and created lots of black mold in 70 percent of the homes. We had to get these people out of their homes into FEMA trailers or shelters.

I then was assigned to

Hancock County after about five weeks in Pearl River County. Before Katrina, Hancock County's population was estimated at 44,000. About 1,600 businesses called the county home. The population after Katrina is largely unknown, but what is known is that more than 70 percent of the houses were made uninhabitable by Katrina and only 200 of the businesses were able to open and operate in some fashion.

As we drove from the Biloxi AFO to our first destination, the city of Diamondhead, the height of the flood waters was marked by the scarring on the trees along the highway made by the refrigerators, washers, dryers and other debris that were hurled by the force of the storm.

In Diamondhead we found that south of I-10 was total devastation. Not a house was standing where they once stood surrounding the Diamondhead Yacht Club. All that was left were foundations or the pilings that supported shorefront homes - even most of the debris had been swept well into the bay. Homes were reported to be found some 20 miles out in the bay, and a large cabin cruiser had been deposited intact in the woods some 400 yards from the marina.

North of I-10, Diamondhead was a curious mix of totally destroyed homes, wind damaged homes and some that had no apparent damage. The roads, however were almost impassable, blocked by trees along with material from the interior of gutted homes.

Note: Ron Moorefield, retired from AT&T and SBC was asked by EMA to go with FEMA to New York for the floods in 2004 for 90 days. Then in 2005, Katrina hit and he was asked to help in Mississippi for six months.

Moorefield has been an Amateur Radio Operator for over 55 years and has the communications skills needed for disasters when telephone and cell sites are not working.

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The cities further west of Diamondhead - Edwardsville, Waveland, Bay St. Louis and the community of Pearlinton at the western edge of Mississippi - fared no better.

The quaint shops and restaurants along the beach in Bay St. Louis that for decades attracted tourists and locals alike no longer were standing. The bank building on Main Street, a registered National Historical Landmark, bore a condemned sign next to the front door.

Along Beach Boulevard from Buccaneer State Park through Bay St. Louis and Waveland, almost all the houses including the Antebellum Mansions that stood for almost 150 years were totally destroyed. In many instances, the only thing left was the brick front steps that stood like a lone site marker where a home once stood.

The stories these people told of their survival while seeing neighbors die in the storm or while hanging on a tree or sitting on a roof for hours hoping for rescue and watching bodies float by took its toll emotionally.

Others told of lost personal treasures, of heirlooms lost in the storm that had withstood the test of time for four or more generations. But some stories brightened our spirits - of friends thought to be lost reunited weeks afterwards, or treasured artifacts

found by friends among the piles of debris blocks from where their houses once stood.

One woman, for instance, who had put a treasured antique punchbowl in her dishwasher in hope of protecting it during the storm only to find her home totally destroyed and the dishwasher no where in sight when she returned, was ecstatic when the dishwasher was located some blocks from her house with the punchbowl unharmed.

The outpouring of help from total strangers was astounding like the University of Miami students who used a long weekend off from classes to come to Bay St. Louis to clear debris from people's property and gut homes.

Most of those who lost just about everything could not grasp the enormity of what lay ahead and were very despondent. But others amazed us with their resilience and attitude, people in the same circumstances who were ready to rebuild their homes, their lives and make their communities even better than before Katrina.

By the time I left for home at the beginning of March the people of Mississippi's Hancock County were trying hard to bring some normality to their lives. More schools

were scheduled to open, many opened by November 2005.

Over 14,000 FEMA trailers were in place in the six county area of Mississippi, many more still needed.

At the end of February, people were still being located in mold infested homes or living in tents. The weather was getting cold at this time of year even in Mississippi. The Corps of Engineers was succeeding in its efforts to clear streets and by the end of February had already removed almost 4 million cubic yards of debris from the streets and yards in Hancock County.

More and more volunteer groups and church groups appeared to work side-by-side with home owners and contractors to gut homes and rid them of mold in preparation for rebuilding, and people were holding community-wide events like Bay St. Louis's Second Saturday gathering on Main Street.

I left Mississippi knowing that my six months away from home and family was well spent. I felt strongly that in some way, I along with the cadre of FEMA volunteers I worked with had made a difference and that those I left behind will continue in their tireless efforts to help the people of Mississippi. It was a pleasure to work with so many professional fire,

police, Red Cross, Salvation Army and VOAD groups from all over the USA.

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