



Statement of Valerie Keller
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Before the joint hearing of the House Committee on Homeland Security's
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response
And the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs'
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

“Lessons Learned: Ensuring the Delivery of Donated Goods to Survivors of Catastrophes”

Washington, DC
July 31, 2008

I would like to thank the chairpersons and the distinguished members of the committees for the opportunity to appear before you. I am Valerie Keller, CEO of Outreach Center, a nonprofit based in south-central Louisiana, and I serve as a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority's Housing Task Force and as co-chair of the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition and of the Louisiana Advocacy Coalition for Housing and Homelessness. We appreciate Congress' continued support and attention to Gulf Coast recovery and your commitment to looking critically at our national systems for response and recovery so that our country is better prepared to aid its citizens in future times of crisis.

Today, I share with you information on the current need for housing and supplies along the Gulf Coast following the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita almost three years ago, in the hopes of informing your analysis of how critically-needed supplies were not delivered to those who needed them and your efforts to prevent such unfortunate situations from occurring in future disasters.

This testimony focuses on three main points:

1. Our work helping families access housing and the supplies they need for self-sufficiency and our efforts working with FEMA and other federal/state agencies
2. The ongoing needs on the ground across Louisiana's still-suffering coast and specifically focusing on the oft-overlooked Hurricane Rita impacted region
3. The impact of the recent CNN story and the Congressional and LRA outreach directing long-needed supplies to help these families still struggling to rebuild and recover.

I will speak to those first two points first—our work providing services and the ongoing needs on the ground –to set the stage on why the recovery supplies we're discussing today were and are much-needed.

The Outreach Center is a grassroots nonprofit human services organization with a proven track record of delivering effective services to people in crisis. Founded in 1990 and serving eight (8) parishes, the Center utilizes a comprehensive services model designed to help people climb from rock-bottom to obtain safe housing, meaningful employment, optimal physical and mental health, and a sense of self-respect, hope and dignity. Its broad scope of services encompass a complete continuum of care that includes an extensive housing and case management program, licensed addiction and mental health treatment center, social enterprises, a women's and children's shelter, a day shelter, and a food and supply distribution center. In addition, the Center is now developing mixed-income housing and catalyzing urban revitalization.

The Outreach Center's core competencies lie with the delivery of comprehensive, outcomes-based case management and supportive services to individuals and families. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina & Rita the Outreach Center established the Transitional Recovery Action Center for Katrina/Rita (TRACK) based on the best practice "housing first" model to help hundreds of displaced families find solutions and access to housing, transportation, employment, and supportive services – rebuilding and empowering one life at a time.

A donation and distribution center for supplies and services was also established and in the aftermath of the storms the Center coordinated the distribution of goods from international relief

organizations around the world, businesses, and government agencies giving more than 800,000 pounds of food, personal care items and medical supplies valued at \$2 million to more than 6,000 evacuees. Displaced families unsure of where or how to begin rebuilding their shattered lives turned to the Outreach Center and got the help they needed.

Since the storms even when other relief and emergency response efforts faded away, community-based nonprofits have continued to serve the overwhelming needs of their neighbors while scrapping together resources. Our case managers are still working one-on-one with displaced individuals and families to assess their needs and establish an action plan to address each need, including housing, employment, transportation, mental health, substance abuse, education/job skills training, childcare, legal needs and community connections. We have employed more than 50 evacuees who lost their jobs in the storms to serve other impacted families. Since August 29, 2005 we have provided 23,817 services including case management and assistance accessing housing, employment, transportation, government benefits to 1,045 households, 2,367 individuals.

Resources are scarce and our agency is currently leveraging local dollars with some funding from the Social Services Block Grant administered through the LA State Department of Social Services (DSS) Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Grant and the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation Displaced Family - Housing Assistance Fund. These funds will aid approximately 300 displaced families in the Hurricane Rita-impacted parishes and FEMA trailer parks to obtain rental and utility assistance for up to a year. Since 2005 we have been working with FEMA, HUD, state agencies and nonprofits to ensure that services are not duplicated for the same families and that gaps are filled as people exit transitional housing and try to secure permanent housing.

In our work with hurricane evacuees, we have helped to place many clients in permanent housing, often serving individuals that have recently been evicted from their FEMA trailers. Many of our clients have accessed HUD's Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program (KDHAP) and Disaster Voucher Program (DVP) rental subsidies, part of which pays a portion of their rent, and incrementally pays less and less, leaving the evacuee to pay more and more. In our experience this program has unfortunately not been a long term solution for most hurricane impacted families, as they are still often unable to pay their rent at the increased market rates and thus are unable to maintain permanent housing and self-sufficiency.

Louisiana, like the rest of the nation, was facing an affordable housing crisis pre-Katrina and Rita; however, an entirely new housing crisis was created when the hurricanes devastated south Louisiana in the fall of 2005, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents. One of the biggest challenges facing evacuees was, and still is, securing safe and affordable housing for their families. While many families have since returned to their hometowns, those unable or unwilling to return to the hurricane-ravaged areas remain in the area and the impact on housing availability has been substantial. South central Louisiana, a region best known nationally for its Cajun food and Zydeco and Cajun music, was the area hardest hit by Hurricane Rita also served as host communities for people resettling after Hurricane Katrina. In this region the rent for one and two bedroom units increased 30% since the storms and a minimum wage worker now has to

work 73 hours per week to afford a one bedroom and 81 hours per week to be able to afford a two bedroom apartment for a family.

Although these storms took a tremendous toll on all in their path, low to moderate-income individuals were disproportionately affected, with the storms severely compounding problems that already existed. Current needs assessments reveal the top issue for hurricane-impacted families is still primarily a lack of affordable housing. As the Outreach Center continues to see a large number of families from the hurricane Rita impacted areas, it is obvious that they have many outstanding basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, healthcare and transportation. They need help accessing affordable housing, rental and security deposit assistance, building materials, transportation, food, employment, legal counsel, household items, furniture, infant supplies, cleaning supplies, school supplies and school uniforms.

In my capacity as co-chair of the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition representing more than 300 organizations across the state, I have had the honor of working closely with Senator Landrieu, and with the support of our delegation and Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, to secure \$73 million for 3,000 supportive housing vouchers--2,000 of which will be used to house disabled and homeless people in the New Orleans region, while 1,000 of the vouchers to help people obtain housing in the other hurricane-impacted areas.

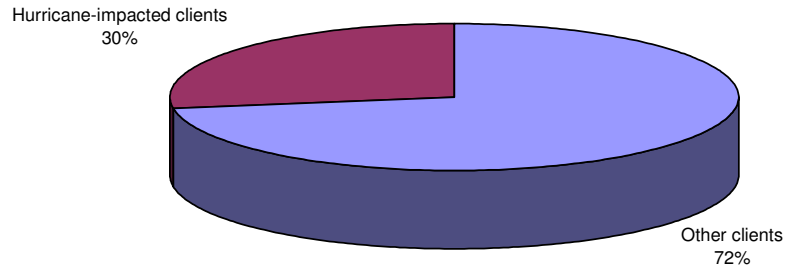
Three years later the needs are very much on-going but the resources to meet those needs are scarce and people are understandably tired and frustrated. So when the story broke on CNN about long-needed disaster recovery supplies being given away for non-disaster purposes, it was quite disturbing to many of the impacted families and agencies like ours who are working with them every day to try and make ends meet. Many displaced families have nothing with which to furnish and keep up their homes and they could have used these supplies long ago. Families we have helped move out of FEMA trailers were not allowed to remove their furnishings and so they are in need of complete bed, living and dining room sets, as well as dishes, pots, pans, cleaning and infant supplies, school supplies, and school uniforms. Any supplies we receive can and will be put to good use as we help these families reestablish housing.

We are tremendously grateful to Senator Landrieu and the Louisiana Recovery Authority for providing the supplies from FEMA that went to Arkansas. We were able to secure these supplies just two weeks ago and since then the calls for assistance have been pouring in from families needing supplies and other agencies looking to help people they are serving. We've talked to many of our nonprofit partners who are equally as disappointed that these supplies sat collecting dust in warehouses. If nonprofit service providers had even known it was available – if FEMA had simply communicated the existence of these critically-needed resources—we would have jumped through whatever hoops necessary to ask for it and get it to people we're serving who need them so desperately.

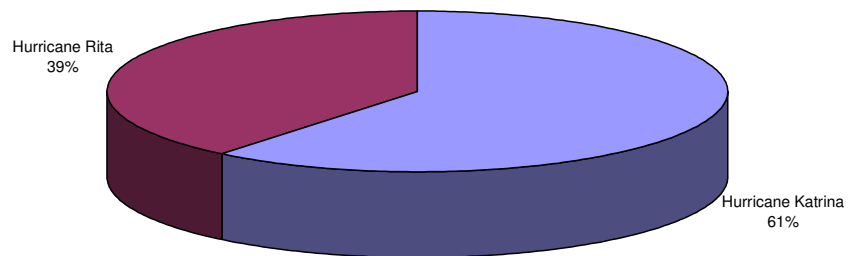
With rental assistance to help bridge the affordable housing gap and with household supplies providing a stable home life, individuals and families are better prepared to pursue employment, education for their children, maintain their health, and be able to afford transportation and childcare, thereby ensuring self-sufficiency and long term sustainability.

Chairpersons, Members of the Committee, the bottom line is that three years after these catastrophes, people are still in need of supplies they could have benefited by receiving years ago. The Outreach Center and community-based organizations stand ready and willing to partner with government agencies to deliver vitally needed services and supplies. We are committed to using our full capacity to help families recover, to stimulate economic development, and to restore hope to communities. Thank you.

**Percentage Increase in Clients Served Post-Hurricanes: 30% increase
(4078 total clients since August 29, 2005)**



Katrina-impacted families and Rita-impacted families served



■ Katrina ■ Rita

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