

Waveland: A Case Study in Community Restoration

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WAVELAND, Miss.—Waveland was a sleepy coastal town before Aug. 29, 2005.

Its residents enjoyed the town's beautiful location, nestled into an inlet of the Gulf of Mexico, its white sand beaches, and its relaxed atmosphere.

Hurricane Katrina's changed the beautiful hamlet to piles of rubble. Longtime residents reportedly have become lost because of the lack of landmarks. The city's downtown area was obliterated, its city offices are in ruins, and large piles of rubble represent the drug store, the hardware store and the Post Office

FEMA/Corps Respond

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to work in Waveland almost as soon as the water receded to restore various aspects of Waveland life.

The first critical need for hurricane survivors was potable drinking water. The Corps met this need by through its water and ice mission staging out of the Stennis Space Center.

Technical assistance teams provided the know-how to restore cell tower service and get the water and waste water systems going again.

Hired labor teams from Vicksburg District began clearing debris so people could again define where the streets were.

Hired labor teams also took the time to stand up the Veteran's memorial which became a source of hope for bewildered citizens.

Getting Waveland Functional

Following shortly on that mission was the need for temporary roof repairs for the remaining structures, removal of debris from the city's right of ways, and putting up some sort of temporary home for city offices. All of these came from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under the direction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Six weeks after the storm, Corps contractors had already made a significant dent in the removal of the 7 million cubic yards of debris estimated to be in Hancock County, much of it consisting of the former homes of Waveland residents.

Russell "Rusty" Retherford, resident engineer for debris removal in Hancock County, said Corps contractors had removed about 900,000 cubic yards of material by midway through October.

“That’s been from the roads and right-of-ways in Waveland, Bay Saint Louis and other areas in Hancock County,” Retherford said.

Debris removal, the biggest job

The scope of damage to the Mississippi Gulf Coast beggars belief. Destroyed houses, businesses, outbuildings, boats, cars and assorted debris span more than 60 miles of coastline, and miles inland from that coast, pushed there by a 30-foot storm surge, one of the largest in recorded history.

Corps experts estimate 23 million cubic yards of debris must be removed from rights of way and private property to allow reconstruction and everyday life to resume.

Seven million cubic yards of that debris are in Hancock County, and a significant portion of that yardage is most of the city of Waveland.

Although some debris removal began almost immediately, six weeks after the storm, Corps contractors had removed an estimated 900,000 cubic yards in Hancock County.

Some local residents had nothing but praise for the contractor’s efforts.

Martena Jamieson, who lives on Jackson Ave., said the Corps crew had worked miracles.

“On Monday we came over to clean up my husband’s storage,” she said. “We got here at 7 a.m., and we wanted to clean up so that we could bring in a mobile home, but there was a huge mound at the corner, and there was no way they’d have gotten the trailer around it. Then these guys came in, and now you can’t believe how spotless it is.”

Similar stories abound throughout Waveland.

In Waveland’s Jackson Avenue, a team of contractors worked under the watchful eye of the Kansas City District’s Joe Lopez.

“It’s our job to see to it their activities meet Corps and FEMA safety and performance guidelines,” Lopez said. “We make certain everything is done up to standards.”

The team had been on the same street for roughly two days, removing debris that mostly consisted of construction material from homes damaged by Katrina’s storm surge.

As this story goes to press, Corps contractors are taking right-of-entry forms to allow debris removal on private property. That process is set to begin in upcoming weeks.

Blue Roofs mean “I’m Home!”

In Waveland, not many homes survived, so the ones that did were important shelter for those who were trying to get the city back online.

FEMA's Operation Blue Roof, managed by the Corps, placed about 4,000 roofs on remaining residences so that people could resume a semi-normal life until permanent roof repairs could be made.

Temporary Buildings restore government/schools

The entire city of Waveland was either destroyed or submerged in at least fourteen feet of seawater. The city and county governments lost everything and had no infrastructure to help citizens recover from the hurricane.

Also lost was the ever-present, but seldom considered, presence of public safety, such as the fire department and the stability and emotional support of schools.

As one branch of the response team prepared sites, other teams began receiving temporary buildings that would become the elementary school, the fire department and the police station.

Waveland Fire Chief David Garcia said the city is grateful for all the assistance it has received.

"The Corps of Engineers has been marvelous," Garcia said. "I can't say enough good about them."

Life returns to Waveland

Weeks after the storm, Waveland is far from totally restored, and it may take years to fully recover. Like the rest of the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, however, some aspects of life are returning to normal.

A trip to Waveland and its neighbor city, Bay St. Louis, still shows acre after acre of debris, but power is back on to most standing homes, Wal-Mart and the local grocery store are in business in temporary structures, and several restaurants are back in service.

The residents of Waveland are working on restoring their properties, with the ongoing help of USACE and FEMA. A sign in one storm-ravaged property says it all, "I'm still here!"