

Remarks by Booker Lester, administrative assistant to CWA Vice President Noah Savant  
Federal Communications Commission field hearing  
September 15, 2005, Atlanta

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today as the Commission examines the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and what is needed to be done to restore communications services to the citizens and businesses of our area.

I'm here today representing Noah Savant, who is vice president of the Communications Workers of America for District 3 in the Southeast. Our union represents about 84,000 workers and their families in this region, many of whom are telecommunications employees.

I'd like to talk today about our members' response to this catastrophe, first in terms of helping to comfort and support those made homeless, and then of the efforts to restore vital communications, especially in Louisiana and Mississippi.

In some cases, it's our members who are critical to the repair and reconstruction effort, who have been so devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

CWA delegates made an immediate commitment of \$4 million on Aug. 30, through the CWA Disaster Relief Fund, to support members and retirees who have lost their homes or other essentials

Additionally, CWA members to date have donated nearly \$40,000 through the CWA website, and are involved in numerous fundraising and support activities, opening their hearts and giving their all to help those made homeless and in need of support.

Just a few examples:

\* CWA members nationwide worked the phones on Friday, Sept. 9, for the national telethon for Hurricane Relief that was broadcast on all major networks.

\* CWA members have been working to make their union halls, community centers and homes available to hurricane victims, from Texas to California.

\* Many locals are adopting homes families, like a Tulsa local that "adopted" an extended family of 19 people from New Orleans who lost everything.

\* Others are working through the Red Cross and United Way to provide relief.

In our union, we often talk about the CWA family. It's at times like this that family steps in to help, and I'm very proud of the efforts of all our members.

We also have been working in partnership with BellSouth, Cingular Wireless and other employers both to help workers hit hard by the hurricane, and to restore services as soon as possible. And we appreciate all that these companies have done, particularly Cingular Wireless and BellSouth, to help care for employees and their families in this crisis.

Some good news: about 400 employees are back on the job at a Cingular Wireless facility in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. That center normally employs about 800 people and was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Cingular put up a tent city there, providing workers with meals, showers, a day care center and counseling through its employee assistance program. The company is continuing to try and locate temporary or permanent work for its displaced employees in retail stores, in other call centers in Lafayette, La., Memphis or Nashville, Tenn., or other locations.

We also want to acknowledge the efforts of SBC Communications and Verizon Communications, which are matching the donations of employees.

Restoring vital communications connections to this region is a huge task. Again, our members are dedicated to getting this job done. They are working around the clock, under difficult and sometimes unsafe conditions, to do their part.

Just about four years ago, CWA members went into action following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Their round-the-clock work got the New York Stock Exchange up and running quickly, and was critical to restoring communications links in lower Manhattan.

The assault by Hurricane Katrina left fierce devastation but again, our members are on the job. Despite high waters still in some parts of New Orleans, and the threat of contamination and disease, CWA members are working to do what's needed to restore telephone and communication links.

Let me give you a report received yesterday from one of our technicians outside New Orleans. He reports that technicians are working 14 hours a day and more,

while many others have been moved to Alabama and other locations to pick up additional work rerouted from Louisiana.

In the greater New Orleans area, about 18 BellSouth central offices remain out of work, mostly because the standing water is still much too high. Some locations were covered by 30 to 40 feet of water.

Several hundred technicians are working out of two locations --- Kenner and Marrero -- and the Marrero garage has a huge tent city sleeping about 300 technicians. Many of them don't have a home to go to.

That's what our members have been doing. And they've been joined by CWA technicians from as far away as Milwaukee, who are bringing not only their expertise, but supplies to help those in need.

In Louisiana, one work center damaged by the storm is up and running on the west bank, but there is so much more that must be done.

In Mississippi, where there was a tremendous amount of building destruction, many CWA families were directly affected, losing everything. We'll continue to assist them, as well as remain a full partner in the effort to restore vital communications there.

Again, thank you for the opportunity today to talk with members of the commission.