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## **Disaster Relief for Deaf Persons: Lessons from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita**

**Barbara White, Ph.D.**  
Gallaudet University

**Abstract:** Victims of disasters who are deaf face unique and insurmountable obstacles in accessing disaster relief. The response to deaf disaster victims of Hurricane Katrina is an example of how the Federal government failed this population, particularly the community of Deaf African Americans who lived in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. In the aftermath of this disaster, the natural helping networks of the deaf community and its organizations proved to be more effective than the organized relief agencies. The author, a deaf social worker, spent two weeks in the Gulf region assisting deaf evacuees who fled both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita during the now infamous hurricanes of 2005.

**Key Words:** disaster preparedness, Hurricane Katrina, deaf organizations

When disaster strikes an entire geographic area with a sizeable deaf population, such as New Orleans, the Deaf community, its organizations and churches, are better positioned to provide help than the major government-sponsored relief organizations. As a deaf professional social worker with disaster mental health training, I spent two weeks in Houston in September, 2005 working with deaf evacuees. This paper is the story of my experience.

When the weather forecasts began to predict a devastating hurricane hitting landfall in the Gulf region of the United States, the deaf<sup>1</sup> community began to prepare for the worst. We are all too familiar with lack of health, education, social and mental health services, and political representation on a daily basis. We knew there were many deaf people in the Gulf Region, and many of them were poor without access to the technology that more affluent deaf people have

such as computers with Internet access, mobile pagers, captioned television and video phones. Were they receiving the warnings about Hurricane Katrina? Did they have access to captioned television broadcasts, text pagers, or even concerned neighbors to convey the warnings to them? The Federal government failed dismally in its response to one of the worst natural disasters in the United States (Hseu, 2006). The response to persons who are deaf and hard of hearing was also dismal, and exposed the widespread neglect of this community, particularly the community of Deaf African Americans who lived in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. The only people who truly recognized the needs of this group were people already connected with the deaf community: deaf professionals, deaf organizations, sign language interpreters, and "deaf churches"—churches with the expressed mission of serving a deaf congregation.

### **Calls for Help Meet with Resistance**

In the days following Katrina's destruction, the Gallaudet University Mental Health Center received requests for help from the deaf communities of Baton Rouge and Houston, two cities that were sheltering the majority of the evacuees from New Orleans. I volunteered for deployment since I had been certified as a Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Service (DMHS) volunteer. While hearing professionals with the same education and training were being sent daily, I would not be sent for another week. The delay in sending me and other colleagues from Gallaudet, the only liberal arts university for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington, D.C., was because the major relief agencies would not acknowledge the need to deploy trained mental health professionals with fluency in American Sign Language to work in the Gulf region. They did not acknowledge that there was a "significant" need.

Whatever the reasons for this resistance, whether it was financial, or because the deaf population comprised a miniscule percentage of

the total number of evacuees, or because relief agencies were not trained to communicate or work with deaf people, it was clear that an entire group of people who needed disaster relief was being summarily dismissed by the major relief organizations.

After many phone calls and emails among Gallaudet University representatives, the American Red Cross agreed to deploy two mental health professionals with disaster training and fluency in American Sign Language to Louisiana. A "deaf shelter" was set up at the Louisiana School for the Deaf. The other four disaster mental health providers were sent with the financial backing of Gallaudet University. Two professionals, including myself, were sent to Houston, without the auspices of any major relief organization. We were on our own.

### **Needs of Deaf Persons in Evacuation Centers**

The evening of my arrival in Houston on September 18, 2005, there was a community wide meeting at Woodhaven Baptist Deaf Church, located in the northwest quadrant of the city. At this meeting reports were given about the services provided the previous week to deaf evacuees at the Houston Astrodome and the nearby George R. Brown (GRB) Convention Center. Both of these large facilities served as evacuation centers and mass shelters for thousands who fled New Orleans and the surrounding towns. Frustration with the major relief organizations and fragmented services to deaf people were quite obvious from the speakers at this community meeting. A sign language interpreter told the group about going to the GRB shelter with other volunteers and using a large sign to identify the deaf evacuees there so they could be together and provide services. Because the majority of the deaf evacuees used American Sign Language, few of the shelter volunteers could communicate with them, and in some cases, evacuees tried to send these volunteers away. The deaf evacuees missed out on im-

portant announcements that streamed from the public address systems of the large shelters. The announcements instructed evacuees which line to stand in to get federal financial assistance, which line to go to for medical appointments, and how to register to locate missing relatives. Deaf evacuees never got this information and thus were passed over for services the first week at the shelter (Parks & Warren, 2005).

My colleague and I arrived in Houston 19 days after Hurricane Katrina, and three days before Hurricane Rita. We prioritized needs day to day. We were sent to provide “psychological first aid,” a term the Red Cross uses to provide emotional support following a disaster. In reality, we did everything from case management to driving evacuees to get food and supplies, helped with applications for Social Security Disability Income, FEMA money, and school registrations for the evacuees’ children. At times the adults found catharsis in retelling their rescue stories, vividly describing their ordeals in ASL. One deaf man told me he was airlifted by helicopter from his roof to a shelter in rural Louisiana. He had no one to communicate with for two weeks because no one at the shelter knew ASL. He was trying to explain to the shelter volunteers that he was separated from his family and wanted to find them. He miraculously saw them on television when Oprah Winfrey was interviewing evacuees in the Houston Astrodome. He finally made the volunteers understand by pointing to the television that his family was in Houston and he was eventually sent there to be with them.

We spent a lot of time on the computer trying to locate missing relatives and getting FEMA checks sent to their new address. My colleague, Alexis Greeves, a certified play therapist, worked with the children with play activities to help them express their grief and loss. The residents used the church’s new videophone—a new technology that allows video conversations in sign language using a television monitor and computer. In this way the evacuees could connect with missing relatives and know they were safe.

One deaf woman cried with joy at the sight of her deaf daughter on the videophone. She was evacuated to another state and had been missing for several weeks. When we drove her to the airport to fly to meet her daughter, she said she had never been on a plane before. It was a new experience for her being inside an airport. Although she had no identification, the airlines allowed her to board after going through security.

### **A Deaf Church’s Response**

Faith-based organizations all over the city reached out to evacuees with donations and meals. The Woodhaven Baptist Deaf Church was the only church in Houston that reached out to the deaf evacuees. Food, clothing, children’s toys and equipment, household items, supplies, hearing aids, TTYs (telecommunication devices to make phone calls), were donated by church and community members. The church was used for community meetings to plan strategies to provide relief, as well as special prayer services for missing relatives and community members. The church also provided critically important relief services in a “deaf friendly” environment where everyone there used American Sign Language (ASL). The deaf church has a critical role in times of disaster, and this church rose to the occasion. The church essentially became a social agency and a center for social support for the evacuees.

Volunteers from the deaf community offered tangible assistance and support to the evacuees in the days following Hurricane Katrina, but after several weeks they experienced “helping fatigue” and their numbers waned. The church pastor, Arthur Craig, and his staff provided the bulk of the needed services in the aftermath of both Hurricane Katrina and Rita, even hiring a person to serve as case manager for several months after the storms.

Some of the deaf evacuees found family members and friends to live with, but four families were immediately relocated to apartments in close proximity to the church. Making home

visits to the apartments was the first step in identifying needs of the residents and also building trust. Since they had just moved in, basic items were needed such as cooking utensils and shower curtains, and things needed fixing such as sink drains and air conditioning, which we reported to the apartment manager. We spent the first few days taking the residents in small groups to shop for needed items and these outings provided an opportunity to engage them in a helping relationship.

### **Evacuating the Evacuees**

Three days after arriving in Houston, there were new warnings about another hurricane named Rita. The warnings grew more intense and the adults in our group pointed to the captioned television forecasts with concern and fear. They had just evacuated New Orleans, and now we were being told to evacuate Houston. They had signed a six months' lease on their new apartments, and now they had to evacuate. The church's pastor, Arthur Craig, rented a van and helped prepare for a 165-mile trip to Austin, where volunteers were waiting for us in a shelter supposedly being set up as "deaf friendly" with interpreters ready to assist us with registration when we arrived. They waited all night because it took us 15 hours to get to Austin. Normally this is a three-hour drive. The evacuation route was clogged and poorly planned with millions of other people evacuating at the same time. The most harrowing part of this trip for me was having a pregnant deaf mother and her three children in my car and not being able to hear the radio for updates on the hurricane warnings. Before we started out, the captions on the television read "Rita now a Category 5 monster." Driving was the easy part; the hard part was not knowing if we were still in danger. I subscribed to emergency alerts on my Sidekick pager, but I did not have reception in some of the towns we passed. During the night my husband back in Maryland emailed to my pager alternate routes to try that he found on Mapquest. One could

say that text pagers are a deaf person's best friend; in this case I felt it was a life saving device.

In the late morning of August 22, our caravan of eleven evacuees and two volunteers arrived at the first shelter supposedly set up for deaf evacuees. We were told it was closed and given instructions to go to a nearby high school that was also sheltering evacuees. We got to the high school and everyone got out of the van to unload their belongings, which they had packed in large green trash bags. Then we were told this shelter was also full and we had to go to another one. Finally, exhausted and irritated that space was not held for the deaf or other disabled evacuees, we were escorted to the next shelter by two deaf community members who worked for a nonprofit organization, Community Services for the Deaf (CSD). Soon after our arrival, we put up signs on the front of the school which read, "Deaf evacuees welcome here."

To our disappointment, there were no cots set up at this shelter. I felt guilty because my colleague and I had been offered beds at the nearby Texas School for the Deaf. Leaving our group there with no beds was out of the question. By this time I felt totally responsible for this group of deaf evacuees, and after driving them away from another hurricane for 15 hours, I felt like they were family. This is a feeling that Shein (1989) calls "at home among strangers," in his book by that name, and proposed a theory of the deaf community that includes both a strong sense of affiliation no matter where deaf people live in the world, as well as a sense of alienation from the hearing society that does not understand them. This strong sense of affiliation among deaf people provides a natural helping network. This was demonstrated in Austin when we realized there were no beds at the shelter. We sent the word out to the deaf community that cots and mattresses were needed by the deaf evacuees. Within hours they began arriving, along with a captioned television and TTY devices for deaf evacuees to make phone calls. It was rather amusing that we had to sneak the items

in while all the evacuees were in the cafeteria, as there was a policy in the shelter that donations cannot be targeted to any one person or group. Yet, this was a clear demonstration that the deaf community network was more efficient than any major relief organization! The Texas School for the Deaf gave us dorm rooms when the shelter closed after the second day—another example of “deaf helping deaf.”

We spent three days in Austin. We connected with the local deaf church in Austin, whose pastor came to visit the evacuees. We found deaf community volunteers to take some of the evacuees to the deaf club. Although the communication with some evacuees was difficult, due to their educational backgrounds and distinct New Orleans sign language, there were obvious feelings of connection among the evacuees and deaf community volunteers. After the Mayor of Houston announced it was okay to return to Houston, we headed back, and this time the trip only took four hours.

We kept a blog of our experience on the laptop we brought, which turned out to be therapeutic on a personal level as we could share our experience on a daily basis with people back home. One of the evacuees wanted to type an entry into the blog to express his feelings about the evacuation:

“Hello. i m happy that Dr. Barbara White and Ms. Alexis Greeves good active going to keep business help people help for deaf that wonderful more for safety hurricane katrina. pastor church friend going to help them becuz of reason come again hurricane in houston tx what have plan get van and car make sure plan night pickup everybody went to travel wow traffic full i make sick of this traffic very slow in hrs 21 arrive there in austin tx.

we went at in shelter for while time 3 days. but dr .barbara and ms.alexis still see check there in shelter becuz make sure everybody okay” (White and Greeves, 2005).

### **Helping the Helpers**

First responders and volunteers often need emotional help in times of disaster as well as the victims. We found this to be especially true when we listened to the stories of the “first responders” to the deaf Katrina evacuees—the interpreters and community volunteers who reached out to the deaf evacuees when they first arrived at the Houston Astrodome. We held a community meeting specifically for the helpers to discuss and understand symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. It was apparent that many of the helpers were experiencing some signs of PTSD as they expressed angry feelings about the way the deaf evacuees were treated.

### **Evidence of Need to Deaf Disaster Victims**

A report by the National Organization on Disability highlights the neglect of deaf and hard of hearing people during Hurricane Katrina:

“The most underserved group were those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Less than 30% of shelters had access to American Sign Language interpreters, 80% did not have TTYs, and 60% did not have TVs with caption capability. Only 56% of shelters had areas where oral announcements were posted so people who are deaf, hard of hearing or out of hearing range could go to a specified area to get or read the content of announcements. This meant that the deaf or hard of hearing had no access to the vital flow

of information” (National Organization on Disability, 2005).

A month after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, I participated in an online discussion sponsored by The American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association (ADARA) on disaster planning and the deaf community. The quotes below highlight the frustration felt by concerned professionals who work with deaf people all over the country (American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, 2005):

“We were told “insufficient evidence of need” [by FEMA].

“If FEMA had told us last year that the problem was insufficient money, I could have dealt with that more than ‘deaf people don’t need it’.”

“We have had no success in getting in touch and volunteering [as interpreters] to help.”

There are no studies focusing on a specific group of people with disabilities in disaster planning, so not much is known about the deaf community, blind community, or other disability groups in terms of disaster planning and preparation. There is an ongoing study at the University of Kansas, “Nobody Left Behind: Disaster Preparedness for Persons with Mobility Impairments.” This is a three year project funded by the Center for Disease Control (<http://www.nobodyleftbehind2.org/>). Yet, even this federally funded study may overlook investigating the unique communication needs of particular groups such as deaf people. A deaf colleague, in advocating for inclusion of deaf people in disability studies research and disaster preparation planning, shares her biggest fears in being caught in a disaster, which highlights some of these unique communication needs of deaf people:

“One of my biggest fears, if I should ever be caught in a disaster, is that I could become injured, or maybe miss out on opportunities to pick up food, water, and other supplies, due to missing full access to information disseminated in an auditory format, or maybe have rescuers overlook me because I don’t hear and respond to their calls. I can picture myself in a group of frightened hearing people who are clearly listening closely to some announcement I cannot hear, feeling even more frightened than anyone else because I have even less information about what’s going on. And I wonder, ‘Who will make sure I’m not left out.’ If I ask someone to repeat important information to me will they help or will they be impatient because they are under such extreme stress themselves? Will they remember me the next time important information is disseminated or will I have to ask again, or ask someone else?” (Shettle, 2005).

### **Ongoing Challenges for Deaf Organizations in Disaster Preparedness**

Deaf organizations around the country rallied to set up special funds and services for deaf evacuees. Gallaudet University provided financial support for four employees to deploy to the Gulf region in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The University Mental Health center set up a free counseling service to provide psychological first aid to any deaf evacuee via videophone with mental health professionals who are fluent in American Sign Language. The

University also sponsored a major conference on Telecommunication and Disaster Response in November, 2005. Student organizations went to the Gulf region and assisted in relief efforts during Thanksgiving and Spring Breaks.

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) supports ongoing relief efforts to deaf people in the Gulf region through its Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund. These funds have been dispersed to agencies in Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi to be used to provide case management, interpreting services, TTYs, videophones, hearing aids and other assistive technologies. The NAD is working with emergency management agencies to enhance and modify their emergency broadcasts and procedures so that the deaf community can be better prepared to respond to disasters. NAD's web site includes a wealth of information on their work with industry to improve paging systems, civil defense strobe lights, emergency captioning, weather warning systems, and radio receivers using text technology (National Association of the Deaf, 2006).

Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. (TDI) advocates for equal access by deaf and hard of hearing people to telecommunications and media. TDI is the recipient of a Department of Homeland Security grant to provide training to the deaf community and first responders on the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people in disasters, the Community Emergency Preparedness Information Network (CEPIN) Project. TDI's web site provides fact sheets on various forms of emergencies and how to prepare for them (Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc., 2006).

The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Action Network (DHHCAN) is an advocacy coalition made up of 16 member organizations represent deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and deaf-blind people. The member organizations include the American Association of the Deaf-Blind, the American Society for Deaf Children, the American Deafness and Rehabilitation

Association, the Association of Late-Deafened Adults, the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, Deaf Seniors of America, Gallaudet University Alumni Association, Jewish Deaf Congress, the National Association of the Deaf, National Black Deaf Advocates, National Catholic Office of the Deaf, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc., United States Deaf Sports Federation, and WGBH in Boston, Massachusetts.

In a major report, DHHCAN found major weaknesses in the nation's emergency preparedness and planning for deaf and hard of hearing populations (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Action Network, 2004). In addition, DHHCAN sent a representative to a conference sponsored by the Federal Communication Commission in March, 2006 to make recommendations for emergency response to the deaf community. One tragic story told in this report was of a deaf man at a shelter who did not know the food was free so he did not eat for three days. He later went into diabetic shock (Hepner, 2006).

## Conclusion

Out of tragedy, we learn lessons. The lessons from the Gulf hurricanes revealed fragmentations and gaps at all levels of government. The crisis has generated meetings, conferences and calls for journal articles to address emergency preparedness and response with the deaf and hard of hearing population. The goal of a master plan to assist deaf people who are victims of disasters is a vision, one which can be accomplished with the persistent efforts of government, community agencies, and the deaf community working together.

**Barbara White, Ph.D.**, is a Professor in the Department of Social Work at Gallaudet University. She holds a doctorate in social work from the Catholic University of America, an MSW from the University of Maryland, and



Bachelor's degree in social work from Gallaudet University. She teaches graduate courses in the MSW program at Gallaudet, which focuses on social work practice with deaf and hard of hearing populations.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The word *deaf* in this article refers to all people with hearing loss who were victims of these Gulf disasters. In most writings about Deaf people, the word is capitalized to honor the cultural existence of a Deaf community and the people who identify with the linguistic minority of Deaf people and use American Sign Language. By not capitalizing deaf, I am mindful of the large numbers of deaf and hard of hearing people who lost out on the assistance provided by the major relief agencies because they could not hear, and perhaps even lost their lives.

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