

# How do you spell relief? H-O-U-S-T-O-N

When disaster struck, city employees answered their neighbors' call for help



Photo by Porfirio Villareal



Photo by Dave Schafer



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**Left:** Health and Human Services nurse Edna Ratler provides immunization to an infant evacuee at the George R. Brown Convention Center shelter. Health provided 7,264 immunizations to evacuees. **Middle:** Mary Hammond, Library, baby-sits a sleeping toddler while the child's mother uses a computer in the impromptu GRB library to search for lost family. **Right:** Minerva Alba, Human Resources, answers phones at the mental health clinic at the GRB.

By Dave Schafer

Valerie Stewart and her three children left New Orleans in her rundown 1989 Lincoln Towncar just before Hurricane Katrina slammed ashore. They were looking for shelter and knew Houston was offering it.

Unsure of where that shelter was, they drove slowly through the downtown streets.

An off-duty police officer pulled Stewart

over and offered help. She bought gas for Stewart's car, food for the family and diapers for the youngest child.

Then she took the family to the George R. Brown Convention Center, where Stewart and her family stayed for nearly two weeks.

Stewart said she'll never forget the officer, whose name is Angel.

"She was my angel," Stewart said.

Stewart's not the only one to find an angel in

Houston. When the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast, Houstonians came to the aid of their neighbors in need. City departments and workers, on the clock and off, led the effort.

"It's been hard," Stewart said. "I've lost everything, and that's frustrating. But the city of Houston has been wonderful. Other than not having a home, I've got no complaint."

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No single story can convey what happened in Houston in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina and its flood of evacuees. But below is a sampling of stories that show how the city and its employees reacted.

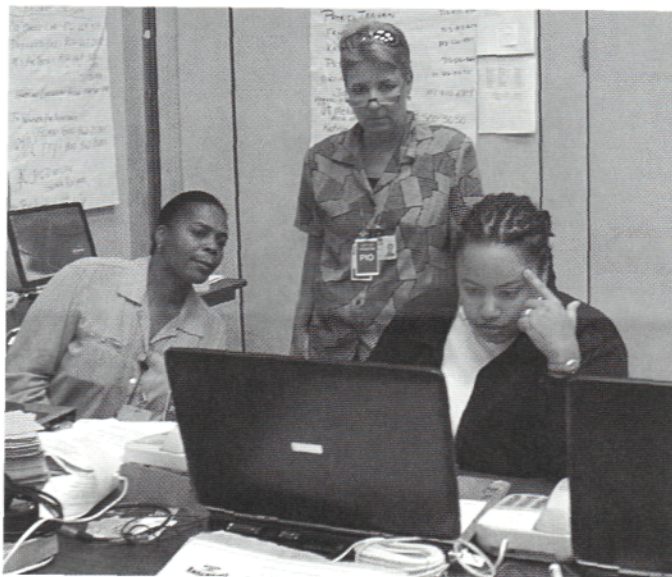


Photo by Dave Schafer

Public information officers Shirley Caldwell, Parks & Recreation, Kathy Barton, Health & Human Services, and Donna Hill-Wiley, Planning & Development, staff the George R. Brown's Joint Information Center. They and other PIOs arranged tours of the GRB and interviews with evacuees and city officials for media personnel.

### Extending a helping hand

On Aug. 31, two days after Katrina hit, 33 Aviation employees delivered 16 trucks and SUVs and three trailers loaded with light towers, light plants, generators and containers of gasoline to New Orleans' Louis Armstrong International Airport. They also took wet vacuums, carpet extractors, submersible pumps and fire hoses to remove floodwater, clean up the airport and restore service.

In Houston, Mayor Bill White arranged for prescription and nonprescription drugs to be available at CVS, Walgreen's, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club pharmacies. Donation warehouses were set up to receive and distribute basic necessities to shelters. The city and Harris County established the Neighbors 2 Neighbors program to match displaced families with schools and families providing transportation.

The Police Department provided security and comfort to the evacuees at Reliant City. Without prompting, telecommunications supervisor Terry Hodgkins developed a plan and set up phone and data transmission for the command post at Reliant Park.

The Solid Waste Management Department and the City Wide Club sponsored a four-day food and clothing drive for Katrina victims. They accepted donations

at several service centers and depositories, and garbage truck drivers picked up curbside donations while they ran their neighborhood routes.

Using their automated bottling facility, water production employees in Public Works and Engineering produced 16-oz and 5-gallon bottles of treated Lake Houston water for the Red Cross and

evacuees housed in Houston.

The Houston Public Library issued three-month Power Cards to evacuees and offered free use of computers. In cooperation with Xerox Global Services, the library provided free copies and printouts of Federal Emergency Management Agency applications and other information for Katrina evacuees.

### A shelter from the storm

In all, officials estimate 245,000 evacuees relocated at

least temporarily to Texas. Harris County opened the Reliant Astrodome, Reliant Center and Reliant Arena. When those filled, the city housed the overflow.

On Sept. 2, White opened the GRB for evacuees. Previously, the city was supporting Harris County and other sheltering agencies.

"We want to use our resources in any way we can to help our neighbors through one of the greatest natural disasters in our nation's history," White said.

Housing and Community Development employees, with Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, raised \$5,000 to purchase materials for the GRB. Employees moved about 3,000 air mattresses, cots, and sleeping bags into the center.

Within 12 hours, Convention and Entertainment Facilities staff had the GRB ready for up to 2,500 guests.

That night, the first 200 evacuees arrived. They continued coming over the next several days.

Dorothy Papallion, a senior accounting clerk in Finance and Accounting, worked Sept. 3 helping evacuees get settled in their new temporary home.

"I knew they needed a lot of help," said Papallion, one of 18,300 volunteers, according to CEF, who kept the GRB going day and night. Hundreds of city employ-



ees volunteered at the GRB and Reliant City. "Watching the coverage on TV made me sad, so I wanted to help."

### **The George R. Brown Hotel**

By Sept. 4, 2,800 evacuees were sheltered in the GRB and 24,300 in Reliant City.

Soon, the convention center became more than just a place to sleep at night.

C&EF staff scheduled entertainment and religious services, arranged hourly searches for loved ones, made hourly public announcements in English and Spanish, and built 80 shower stalls.

Services available at the GRB included Red Cross, FEMA, food stamp and school registrations, a full-service ambulatory medical facility, informational programs, housing, post office, and banking services.

Other areas were designed to take the edge off stress, such as a gym for teens and older youths and a play area for pre-teens.

HPL set up an impromptu library complete with 28 computers, books donated from the community and publishers, crafts and toys for children, and board games like Skip Bo and Candyland.

Tech Corps, a nonprofit organization that provides computers and training to schools and organizations in low-income areas, set up 30 computers in the computer resource room. There, evacuees could register for FEMA, view aerial photos of their devastated New Orleans neighborhood, look for lost friends and relatives or set up a SimHouston account to check e-mail and save files.

### **Health help**

Human Resources Employee Assistance Program, along with Fire Department psychologist Steve Pierrel and other volunteer mental health professionals provided mental health services and emotional support to the people housed in the GRB.

Mental health wasn't the only medical concern. With so many people living in so close an area, the possibility of a disease outbreak was real. So epidemiologists from Health and Human Services watched for illnesses.

Tubes of sanitizers were readily available throughout the GRB and posted signs prompted residents to wash their hands.

Health connected with the Louisiana Immunization Registry, which allowed nurses to give proper, nonrepetitive immunizations to those 17 and younger in the GRB and Red Cross shelters.

"We were able to save dozens of thousands of dollars because of that," said

## **Unlovely Rita**

On Sept. 21, Mayor Bill White's office moved from Hurricane Katrina response to Hurricane Rita preparation. White and Harris County Judge Robert Eckels called for a mandatory evacuation of residents in storm-surge areas and recommended evacuation of residents in other flood-prone regions. Essential city staff were activated.

The hurricane turned away from the city, but it's landing on the Texas/Louisiana border left many Houston-area residents without power.

The near miss provided a dry run of the city's hurricane response plan. The Emergency Operations Center was activated just days after it shut down following the Katrina relief efforts. The EOC is the central point for city departments and other government agencies to monitor and manage the action.

Evacuation routes were established, and shelters were opened, including hub shelters in schools and gymnasiums along I-45 in case residents couldn't get out of the city in time.

All this while the city continued to provide essential services.

Important lessons were learned. White, Eckels and Gov. Rick Perry have formed a task force that will recommend ways to improve transportation and logistics for large evacuations, such as the evacuation of an estimated 3 million Texans from the Gulf Coast area before Hurricane Rita.

"Governor Perry, Judge Eckels and I are quite concerned that both state planning and implementation of a plan needs to improve for reducing traffic congestion and refueling in the case of a large-scale evacuation of the Houston Metropolitan Area," White said.

Porfirio Villarreal, public information officer.

Like so many other departments, Health's impact wasn't limited to the GRB. Nurses went to Red Cross shelters to conduct medical assessments. Health centers gave prenatal care to evacuees and tetanus shots to people exposed to contaminated floodwaters. The Women, Infants and Children program provided vouchers for nutritious foods to those who received WIC services in their

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hometowns.

### There's no place like home

Even as the rush to provide shelter was ongoing, officials were looking at the next stage for evacuees: permanent or semipermanent housing.

With help from the Housing department, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhoods and Housing scoured the city for evacuee housing. According to Deputy Chief of Staff John Walsh, the office had moved 3,178 households into private housing by October. He expected to have another 12,717 units ready by the end of the month.

Getting into private housing is impor-

tant for the family, Walsh said. Family life will be fractured as long as they remain in public shelters.

The Building Services Department provided janitorial services and electricians to the GRB, built showers at Reliant Arena, got furniture for the newly housed evacuees, and conducted home inspections to ensure the apartments were habitable.

"The department's objective with Katrina was to get families out of shelters and into dignified housing where they can rebuild their lives and regain their independence," Director Issa Dadoush said.

### Working for a living

HR's temporary services division hired dozens of evacuees to put together furniture and move beds and food into the

new residences.

Gallery Furniture donated the furniture, and the Houston Food Bank provided the food that was stocked in the cupboards and refrigerators.

Evacuee Luis Guzman was a taxi driver before the hurricane drove him from New Orleans. Wanting to keep busy and make money, Guzman joined the work crews.

"If we have money, we'll be all right. We can rebuild," he said. "I'm happy to work at least three weeks. It means I can survive."

But temporary work wasn't the only kind evacuees were being offered. WorkSource, which matches potential employees with companies looking for workers, spent two weeks at the GRB. According to Pauline Gallien, onsite manager, WorkSource, which is funded by the

Texas Workforce Commission and federal grants, saw about 1,900 evacuees in the first week.

Hundreds of them received jobs, Gallien said.

Before the GRB closed as a shelter Sept. 21, it had been home to more than 5,000 people. Other shelters remain open, and the evacuees' struggles continue. So does the helping hand extended by the city of Houston.

To respond to evacuees' needs and begin transitioning people out of the shelters, Mayor Bill White and Harris County Judge Robert Eckels set up the Houston Katrina/Rita Fund, an IRC 501(c)(3) charitable organization modeled after the 9/11 Fund. For more information, visit <http://www.hkrf.org/>.

