

Burnout in a Crisis

How Katrina relief workers are faring

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Jan Wawrzyniak worked 15 hours a day for seven days straight, answering calls from people who were stranded or searching for relatives. Calls from New Orleans to 2-1-1, the nationwide human services referral phone line, were being forwarded to her United Way office in Monroe, La. She was suddenly catapulted from administrator to crisis operator, fielding hundreds of urgent requests for shelter, supplies, food, and funds. "I was sleeping three hours a night and eventually had a meltdown. I just couldn't stop crying," Wawrzyniak says.

She was suffering from the kind of burnout that many people working in intense and prolonged disaster situations face. For her and thousands of other relief workers in the Katrina effort, workload and control issues (see main article) packed the hardest punch. Too many problems to handle in too short a time – with inadequate resources and hand-tying bureaucracies – made things rough for professionals and volunteers alike.

"Before we expanded to a 50-person station, it was chaos," says Wawrzyniak of the Monroe outpost, which has fielded about 56,000 Katrina calls. "People telephoned in dire straits, and you'd feel frantic trying to get them what they needed – only to realize it wasn't working. One man said he was running out of diapers for his baby. He was considering breaking into the local Wal-Mart and leaving an IOU. It was heartbreaking."

Jack Slattery, a former Peace Corps volunteer, helped the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) set up a disaster recovery center in

Bogalusa, La., and worked with hurricane victims filing for financial assistance. "FEMA told us it would be emotionally draining, and it was," says Slattery. "So many needs and so few resources." After a month of working 12-hour days, he was ready to go home.

"One of the things that made the job challenging was FEMA itself," Slattery says. "Orders came from above, military style, and there was an unwillingness to move the most urgent requests up the system." Slattery also says that FEMA's rules governing which Katrina victims received \$2,000 aid grants seemed capricious, and frequently neglected the poorest and neediest. "It was frustrating to work in such an environment," he says.

Slattery personally coped by taking morning walks, waking up every day at 6 a.m. "It helped me release stress," he says. He also vented his emotions to

his wife and other workers.

Wawrzyniak's 2-1-1 operation instituted rotating schedules so that everyone could take at least one day a week off. The center also made crisis counselors available to workers on every shift.

Such techniques are recommended by the American Psychological Association, which regularly provides mental health workers to the American Red Cross for disaster relief efforts. "The Red Cross approach used to be: Work until the job gets done," says Richard Heaps, a psychologist who helped organize counseling services for Katrina victims in September. "Giving workers periods of rest to recover their energies makes them better able to serve others," he says.

Or, as flight attendants say, put the mask on your own face before attempting to assist others.

—Marguerite Rigoglioso



Where to start? Hurricane relief workers find coping with disaster overwhelming without care for themselves.