

9/15/05 Deployed to Jackson, MS by WEM through EMAC, Michael Ciardo, EM Dir. Whitewater, WI, Steve Braun, EM Dir. Grant County and Nancy Crowley, EM Dir. Manitowoc County reported to Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) at the state EOC for ID's, MEMA shirts, hotel arrangements, and instructions to report to FEMA in the Joint Field Office (JFO) in the same building at 7 a.m. on 9/16 for our assignment.

9/16 Crowley was "praying" we wouldn't be assigned to a desk and phone in Jackson for our 16 day assignment, and her prayers were answered! FEMA personnel at the JFO told us to report to Mike Jones, FEMA Community Relations Coordinator, Branch I in the Advance Field Office (AFO) in Biloxi, MS. Our mission: to assist in seeing that the victims of Hurricane Katrina's damage August 29, 2005 in the 6 Gulf coast counties (Pearl River, Stone, George, Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson) of Mississippi were "plugged into" the Federal and State recovery assistance programs.

With adrenaline levels running high, the outside temperature 97 degrees and the humidity a "pleasant" 70%, we caravanned in our rental cars the 150 miles south from Jackson to Biloxi excited, apprehensive, but enthusiastic; sure our EM skills would pass the test in any assignment. Not one of us expected to find the overwhelming devastation we saw all around us the farther south we drove. Where once stately 200 year old oaks and pecan trees and forests of white pine graced the skyline, leafless skeletons remained. Destroyed by salt water and wind, the trunks and branches etched an eerie backdrop reminiscent of a science fiction movie.

I also don't think one of us expected the devastation to affect us as deeply as it did over the course of our two week assignment. As we began to meet the people (from every cultural, ethnic, and economic group) whose lives were torn apart by this incredible hurricane and listen to their stories of survival and loss; their fears of what the future held for them; their frustrations with some aspects of the response and recovery "system"; Steve, Mike, and I literally felt their pain and their frustration.

We worked long 12 hour days in the field in oppressive heat and humidity from 9/17-29 with members of FEMA and DHS from offices in Kansas and Washington, DC. Some had disaster response experience while others, like us, were as green as new grass. While we were made to feel equals by these team members, the management staff of our Branch of the AFO often treated the three Wisconsin members of team as invisible outsiders which was a tragic waste of our talents.

We completed our last day in the field (9/29) taking a last drive through Hancock and Harrison Counties, the two counties most severely damaged in the storm. All three of us had ambivalent feelings about leaving because what we had each experienced during our assignment was "life-altering". There is so much more work to be done before these communities can be made whole and we all would have liked to stay to help that effort. We also knew that staying at this time wasn't realistic.

We believe our work in MS "made a difference to the people: we listened to, tried to help, comfort, laughed or wept (internally) with whether they were relief workers, hotel employees, gas station attendants, hurricane victims, or members of our team. All of us were frustrated with the layers of procedural and political red tape bureaucracies like FEMA and the Red Cross are buried under. We shared the contempt for procedures and rules that seemed rigid and often senseless, adding to the already heavy burden the storm victims were weighted down with.

We believe our expertise as professionals was under utilized in our assigned work, however, each one of us made "the system" work for us by actively looking for ways to be productive. Fortunately the DHS and FEMA team members we were assigned to work with gave us the room

to spread our wings when we were away from the scrutiny of "management". That freedom was a win-win outcome for all of us and for the people we hope to have served.

Overall, the experience we shared will make our respective programs in three small communities of Wisconsin even better than they already are. No seminar, conference, or textbook could have taught us what we experienced by "walking the walk and talking the talk". As county and municipal directors of emergency management programs, we are a valuable resource in these types of response efforts, however training and planning for all of us interested in similar assignments is, in my opinion, a must if we're going to be effective. With the serious simultaneous events that have affected the US this year, depleting the human resources who work disaster response for the major Federal agencies, I believe the States, through EMAC, must strengthen their capabilities to provide competent people to augment federal assets when help is requested by a state in distress. By developing a cadre of local emergency management professionals to "think outside the box of their local/state jurisdictions' routines", we'll all be safer and better prepared.

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