

## **Sustaining the Impact of Volunteers in the Gulf: The Federal Government Must Lend its Support**

*By Erin Lawless, Program Manager of Gulf Coast Operations, Rebuilding Together National*

America's spirit of volunteerism is one of our most deeply rooted values, ingrained in our culture. When Hurricanes Rita and Katrina hit in 2005, the entire world sympathized with the victims experiencing such devastating destruction and chaos. As the water receded, wind-damaged homes were covered by tarps, and FEMA trailers were distributed; citizens of the Gulf Coast wondered how and when they would be able to return home.

The country looked for direction and a way to solve the problem of returning 2 million displaced American citizens back to their Gulf Coast homes. Many Americans, as well as thousands of others from around the world, answered the call and chose to volunteer.

The immense impact that volunteers have made on the overall recovery efforts in the Gulf has inarguably been the main reason why any residents at all have been able to return home. Volunteer efforts have, in fact, been a form of consistent aid that inhabitants of the Gulf Coast have been able to depend on since 2005. The job is certainly not finished. It is imperative to ensure that volunteers are able to continue to be a driving force behind the recovery effort.

The Gulf Coast volunteer recruitment efforts of a national non-profit organization, Rebuilding Together, where I am Program Manager of Gulf Coast Operations, show the impact that volunteers have had on Gulf Coast recovery. Many people have not been pleased or satisfied with the efforts put forward by the government. Non-profits and faith-based organizations were positioned to take the lead and filled in the gap where government could not or would not step up. These non-profits and faith-based organizations created the opportunity to volunteer and built a path for volunteers to follow and give the best of themselves. Volunteers, both young and old, rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed have all played a crucial role in the recovery effort.

As we move farther away from the storms, public interest wanes and the volunteers that have taken a strong leadership role need to see more from the federal government in terms of guidance, infrastructure, and financial support. When we watch the news and see government bailing out banks and the stimulus package being rolled out, we wonder how this will all affect the Gulf.

Wouldn't it be great if the federal government could put more systems in place that would encourage and incentivize volunteers to continue long-term rebuilding of the Gulf? Let me give you an example of how this might work.

Rebuilding Together has partnered with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), an independent federal agency, to carry out a demonstration grant to engage highly skilled volunteers to come donate their time and talent to make a difference along the Gulf Coast. Our organization is uniquely positioned to attract highly skilled, highly committed volunteers to provide high-impact results. Our expertise as a non-profit organization that focuses on preservation of affordable homeownership positioned us to leverage federal dollars and ultimately engage skilled volunteers in the recovery efforts more effectively.

The volunteers that come to mind that participated in this innovative demonstration project include the members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), who traveled from Providence, Rhode Island to Waveland, Mississippi. They repaired a home for a 76-year-old woman whose home was affected not only by the hurricanes of 2005 but also the hurricanes of 2008 and who was swindled by an unqualified electrical contractor that started a job and never finished it. The highly skilled IBEW electricians, 45-year veterans of the trade, were brought to tears when they realized that the services they were offering through volunteering would truly change a life. The skilled labor they provided was a gift that this homeowner would have otherwise not have been able to access. After the group of volunteers finished a week's worth of work, this particular homeowner was able to turn the lights and appliances on in

every room of her home for the first time in years. Not only did the volunteers change this woman's life, they also went into four other homes in Waveland and made similar improvements.

The stories of the homeowners devastated by the storms of 2005 are astonishing and they are certainly deserving of attention. The stories of the volunteers, like our IBEW folks, who have tirelessly worked along the Gulf Coast are also striking. These volunteers, just like many Americans out there, were all unemployed and out of work at the time they made the journey to the Gulf. The grant funds and partnership with CNCS were truly the last piece of the puzzle that allowed them to make the trip. If more opportunities like this were made available from the federal government to both skilled and unskilled volunteers who have shown a loyalty to the Gulf, we would see the rebuilding of the area take place at a much faster pace. Government committing resources to this cause along with non-profits and faith-based organizations taking advantage of the opportunities available to them is a bold combination that can produce amazing results.

The most impressive thing about volunteers that have committed to rebuild the Gulf is that they are exactly that, committed. There are teams of volunteers that continue to travel to the Gulf at least two times a year since the storms. While many have forgotten the region's continuing problems, these volunteers keep their pledge to rebuild a piece of their country despite their own personal setbacks in the current economy. They have been able to see that progress has been made but know that there is still so much to be done. These annual volunteer groups show that they feel a connection to the Gulf. The culture of the Coast has gotten in their hearts and their souls.

Of these permanent volunteers, a group from St. Louis, Missouri comes to mind. They budget their own funds every year to caravan to Louisiana and donate a week of their time to do whatever is needed. Carpentry work, landscaping, painting, and plumbing are all included in the tasks these folks complete during their visits. This past year there were several in the group that had lost their own jobs but made the trip anyway. This truly demonstrates the spirit of volunteerism, and we should expect the same level of commitment to the recovery from our federal government. These volunteers deserve the opportunity to access the financial support required to continue making these trips. Imagine if, rather than bailing out the bankers on Wall Street, we fully supported the efforts of non-profit organizations, faith-based groups, and the average volunteers that are making a real difference in this country?

Government should continue to focus on putting systems in place that allow for easier access to resources allocated for rebuilding the Gulf. Non-profits and faith-based organizations can employ creative strategies to engage the expertise of volunteers but need support to do so. Using federal dollars to stimulate the recovery of one of the most culturally rich, diverse, and iconic pieces of the United States in this way is certainly justifiable. In the first moments after a disaster area is declared, the government immediately begins to act and redirect resources. Imagine if funds were not only released for materials, supplies, and the rebuilding of infrastructure, but that resources would be made widely available to volunteers that would like to invest in the long-term recovery of a community.

We are more than three years away from the hurricanes of 2005; our volunteers are a consistent source of support that the victims of the hurricanes can depend on. For them, it comes down to the idea that we should treat others as we would like to be treated. Certainly, every volunteer that comes to the Gulf prays that in the event that disaster strikes their own place of residence, volunteers would come from near and far to help them rebuild and restore the home they loved so much. If given the chance and support by government, I believe they would.

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