

# **Newsletter of the LCHR and BRCHR**

Louisiana Council on Human Relations and the  
Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations

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## **Your Dues May be Due**

The LCHR Board has decided that since the Annual Meeting of the Council is held in June, dues will become due on July 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. Since the BRCHR often holds a joint Annual Meeting with the LCHR, this same policy will apply for the dues of the BRCHR. Some of you may have recently sent contributions. But if you have not paid dues since early this spring, you should consider that your dues are due. Several members of the LCHR and the BRCHR have given financial support beyond the \$15.00 single membership or \$20.00 family membership fee. We are very grateful for that support. Your dues are used mainly for the cost of Newsletter mailings and for the purchase of plaques for persons being honored at the Annual Humanitarian Award Programs (awards given by both the LCHR and the BRCH).

## **Katrina After 10 Years: Memorandum for Record by James E. Cross**

I would prefer not to write this article in the first person format. I have a personal folder on Katrina and I must confess that my main motivation is to document this information as a "Memorandum for Record". Although this will emphasize my personal involvement in activities related to Katrina, included will be valuable information concerning activities to which other can relate. The main issues I will address are related to my involvement with the evacuees from New Orleans being housed at the Church where I attend, a FEMA conference sponsored by Southern University during May 2006, the Katrina related 2006 Annual Meeting of the Baton Rouge and Louisiana Councils on Human Relations, and "Lessons Not Learned".

When the winds of Katrina were subsiding, it was originally thought that the usual action of recovery from hurricanes would begin. But then came the word that the levees had broken and there was a massive evacuation from New Orleans. I am a member of the Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church located at 9700 Scenic

Highway in Baton Rouge. During the evening after the levees broke, the Administrative Assistance to the pastor called several of us deacons to inform us that radio stations were reporting that our Church would be a shelter for those evacuating New Orleans. No one from the Church had given such information to the radio stations. The pastor was at an out-of-town meeting. The Administrative Assistant to the Pastor told us that persons fleeing the hurricane were on the way to our Church and there were no plans to accommodate them. She said she had called the local Walmart store and had priced various types of sleeping items, but there were no persons available to write a check for the items. When one of the other deacons (a former professional football player) asked about the cost, he was told it would be between \$400 and \$500. His response was "I can handle that". Both he and I had pickup trucks and we went to a Walmart store, loaded our trucks up and returned to the Church. This solved the problem of having sleeping items ready for the many persons soon arriving from New Orleans. During the days immediately following, it was pretty much "all hands on deck" for the Church members. Persons and organizations from several

parts of the country learned of what Mount Pilgrim was doing and sent assistance. Mount Pilgrim has a 20 room Educational Center and was initially able to provide shelter for nearly 300 persons. It was the week before Thanksgiving when the last persons from New Orleans were able to find other shelter and left the Church facilities. It would take an entire book to fully document the manner in which the Mount Pilgrim Church responded to this need.

During the coming year, there were many reviews related to the readiness to respond to disasters. Southern University in Baton Rouge was involved in one such activity. Southern University hosted the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regional HBCU (Historical Black Colleges and Universities)/FEMA Conference on May 17-19, 2006. The theme of the conference was “HBCUs and Their Communities United: Protecting People and Providing Resources”. I attended part of the conference/workshop. The conference began with “A Brief Overview of the Impact of Disasters on Communities using Louisiana and the 2005 Hurricane Season as a Case Study” followed by a presentation on “The 2005 Hurricane Season Impact on Louisiana”. The session objectives were set forth as (1.) Provide FEMA’s mission, roles, and responsibilities as they relate to emergency management in general, and mitigation in particular; (2.) Identify federal resources available to state and local emergency managers and universities; (3.) Identify state and local opportunities and resources, and (4.) Identify HBCU resources and capabilities. Some specific issues addressed (with pamphlets provided) were “Before and After Disasters”, “Hurricane Safety: Things to Know About Preparing Yourself and Your Property”, “Reduce Your Risk From Natural Disasters: Low-cost Mitigation Measures”, “Preparing for Disaster for People With Disabilities and Other Special Needs”, “Helping Children Cope with Disasters”, “Community Relations: Partnerships That Work”, “Contributions Universities Can Make to Developing Local Emergency Plans” and “Resources Available to Assist Universities in Their Planning Efforts”. A disaster

mitigation and management plan developed by one HBCU (Norfolk State University) was presented as an example. When someone asked “How do we make certain that everyone know about the plan?” the answer given was “The plan must be practiced. Have drills and exercises. Don’t leave students and others in the dark.” This question and the answer given is why I will include some remarks on “Lessons Not Learned.”

The Louisiana Council on Human Relations and the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations held a joint Annual Meeting on June 3, 2006, the month following the conference at Southern University. I was on the program planning committee for the Annual Meeting (being a board member of both Councils). During the Southern University/FEMA conference, I received a commitment from a FEMA representative to provide a person to make a presentation at the Annual Meeting. The theme for the Annual Meeting was “Important Aspects of Disaster Evacuation Plans to Include the Elderly and the Indigent”. The main issue address by the FEMA representative was “The Individual and Households Assistant Program”. However, at this time, the scope of information to be presented to the public by FEMA was being greatly curtailed and carefully vetted due political backlash and criticism of the government’s response to Katrina. I also called and had conversation with some Louisiana State disaster officials and it seemed that they too had been instructed against providing any pertinent information unless it had been cleared through State offices. The FEMA representative discussed the problem of the many New Orleans evacuees who left with just “the shirts on their backs”. Most had hardly any money and many of them had no identification. The FEMA presentative said his job was to give immediate emergency assistance to them. They especially needed money to buy food. He received criticism because of the fraud of some persons who were not New Orleans evacuees applying for and given assistance but he had to do what he thought was best.

I was on the program and made a presentation on “The New Orleans Disaster Plan as a Model and an Update on

Preparedness by the State of Louisiana.” The New Orleans Disaster Plan” was posted on the Internet during the time when Hurricane Katrina occurred but the plan was removed sometime after the hurricane. Samples of the notes I have on file for my presentation are as follows: I stated that the two hurricanes of last year, Katrina and Rita, had made us very hurricane conscious. It is recognized that we could suffer other disasters where similar action would be taken as for hurricanes. Thus, to be all inclusive, the term disaster evacuation is being used rather than hurricane evacuation. It is recognized that hurricanes and chemical releases are the two types of disasters we are likely to experience. Disaster planning has a wide range of aspects. Some of these aspects are in our newspapers every day and are being debated daily by our State and National governments. A variety of workshops and conferences are being held with local, State and federal officials providing input and asking for input from the local citizenry. One concern being expressed at such conferences and workshops is how to get current information out to the various citizens with a special concern for the elderly and the indigent. With information being presented to community leaders on Emergency Preparedness the hope is that this information will be shared with others. The State has mandated that all agencies have an Emergency Evacuation Plan. The report is that we have had more hurricanes per year during the last 5 years than we have had in any 5 year period over about the last 100 years. The projection is that this trend will continue for several more years. The Board of Regents has mandated that all colleges and universities have a disaster plan. The State is not responsible for forming local plans. Its job is to support the local plans. The concern is for the protection of life and property. Three time lines of concern are (A.) pre-event planning; (B.) the time of the event - execution of the plan to protect life and property and (C.) post-event - recovery with the goal of returning to normal activities as soon as possible.

I pointed out that New Orleans had an Emergency Preparedness Plan on the Internet. It showed ANNEX I as HURRICANES. Although the mayor of New Orleans received a lot of criticism, New Orleans did have a plan, seemingly a good model for an evacuation plan. But having a plan and executing the plan are two different things. It is evident that the plan was not executed. Some of the aspects of the plan were as follows: (A.) Phase I (p.1.) Training, Exercises and Education. Page 6, the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph

mentions the elderly and the special needs population; (B.) Phase II. (p.9) Warning, Evacuation, and Sheltering. Page 14 addresses the “Evacuation Time Requirements” based on a Category 3 storm. Page 16 gives recognition that an actual storm may differ from a Category 3 and that other considerations would be used. Page 18 addresses sheltering. It states that approximately 100,000 citizens of New Orleans do not have means of personal transportation; (C.) Phase III. (p.24) Recovery; (D.) Phase IV. (p.22) Mitigation: This includes those activities, policies or programs developed and adopted by government officials which will reduce, eliminate, or alleviate damage caused by disasters. The plan gives a list of several schools that are approved as Hurricane Evacuation Shelters. However, the plan states that this information is not for public information, pointing out that the particular school so designation may not actually be used as a shelter and that actual shelters to be used would not be specifically identified until they are ready and opened, and a related public announcement is made. Included are a 9 page document with the title “Special Needs Shelter Plan”, a 2 page document with the title “Nursing Facilities Hurricane Plan”, and a 1 page document with the title “After the Hurricane.” A list of eight items is given in this document. The last item says to check refrigerated food for spoilage if power has been off during the storm. Again, as stated above, having a plan and executing the plan are two different things. This is driven home by an article dated September 23, 2005, still available on the Internet at the Web address

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4860776>

with the title “How New Orleans' Evacuation Plan Fell Apart”. It was written by a New Orleans council woman.

As part of my presentation, I stated that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure and a stitch in time saves nine. In preparing a hurricane evacuation plan, you can't have a “one size fit all plan”. Our Governor is warning that we should not become complacent if we evacuate several times and the storm end up passing us by. We should not develop Hurricane Phobia by saying they have been crying “wolf, wolf” all these times and there has been no wolf. Just be aware that it is better to err on the side of caution. The next time, the big bad wolf might appear.

Finally, I will give some comments on “Lessons Not Learned”. No hurricane has hit Louisiana this year as of date. As a result, it seems that we are not fearing the big bad wolf to the degree he deserves to be feared. It is said that in time of peace we should prepare for war (in that it is too late to start preparing once the war starts). A large amount of hurricane activities were held during the year after the two hurricanes in 2005. Evacuation exercises were held and there were a wide range of hurricane related conferences and workshops such as those discussed above. It was acknowledge that hurricanes are only one source of disasters for which we should prepare. With the many chemical plants in the area, the plans should include disasters caused by chemical plants. As was stated above in the New Orleans hurricane plan, it was known that approximately 100,000 citizens of New Orleans did not have means of personal transportation. It was state that the Louisiana Board of Regents has mandated that all colleges and universities have a disaster plan. But as pointed out, having a plan and being prepared to execute the plan are two different things. Perhaps every city should be required to have an annual evacuation exercise and other related annual disaster related exercises conducted. In addition, plans should be made in preparing and dedicating shelter locations in advance and those shelters inspected annually for their readiness. During Hurricane Katrina, we at the Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church had to prepare facilities for the New Orleans evacuees to take showers. I called Southern University on the day when evacuees first began to arrive and inquired if the athletic facilities could be used for showers. I was told no. The University did not have an understanding of the magnitude of the problem. The following day, the University was opening up its facilities to those coming from New Orleans and did house a number of evacuees. The importance of prior planning can be found in an article written in The Advocate newspaper. An article dated May 5, 2006 had the title “Fields, Holden face off over using River Center”. Mayor Holden was complaining about the financial stress being placed on Baton Rouge from hosting the New Orleans evacuees. The article said “Fields persuaded a Senate committee Thursday to approve resolutions asking the Governor’s Office to develop a plan for using public buildings during a natural disaster.” We need to learn the lessons that history teaches.

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