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As Domestic Violence Rises in New Orleans in Wake of Katrina, Catholic Charities Provides a Refuge for Abused Women

At a time when domestic violence in New Orleans has increased 45 percent since Hurricane Katrina and women have few places to go, Catholic Charities' Crescent House is providing a safe place for women to come to escape the abuse at home and get support determining the next steps for a positive future.

"Crescent House is a beacon of hope for women who need reassurance that they do have the strength and power to survive what they are going through," said Mary Claire Landry, director of domestic violence services for Catholic Charities of New Orleans and president of the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "It's a space for women to receive whatever support they need to survive the abuse and determine a plan of action for getting out of it."

Domestic violence has always existed in New Orleans, but has been exacerbated by the increasing stress by the property loss, job loss, dislocation and other issues that resulted from the storm, said Landry, adding that many women are finding themselves being used as a scapegoat – and yet they are reluctant to leave their homes.

"Finding affordable housing has always been a barrier for women, especially women with children, who want to leave battering situations," said Landry. "After Hurricane Katrina, this has become an even more difficult barrier to overcome due to the shortage and the significant cost of renting housing in the greater New Orleans area and even throughout Louisiana. And to make matters worse, the effects of the storm have incapacitated many of the counseling and social services that existed previously, and other support systems that victims rely on, such as friends and family, no longer exist because they have been forced to relocate."

Crescent House has staff and services available to help women deal with the fears and challenges of getting out of an abusive relationship.

"Women are more reluctant to leave their battering situations because of their fears of not being able to successfully relocate their families," Landry explained. "They appear more likely to remain in the situation and attempt to moderate the abuse until they can determine a safe exit strategy. Crescent House helps these women come up with that exit strategy."

Since Hurricane Katrina, Crescent House has redesigned its services to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of the victims who are more isolated and in need of support than ever. Crescent House is now providing survivor advocates to work in partnership with the domestic violence unit of the New Orleans Police Department, the Sexual and Domestic Assault Unit at Charity Hospital and with the Civil District Court where women are seeking restraining orders. In addition, Crescent House promotes advocacy for reforming the judicial system to better hold batterers accountable for their actions and better protect victims of those actions so they are not forced to leave their homes.

Other services include support groups, children's services, individual counseling and case management. Additionally women may come for respite – to sleep, relax, think, reflect or just take time to gather themselves and their options.

Louisiana's statewide crisis line for people wanting to access help is 888-411-1333.

Catholic Charities USA has raised a record \$158 million to assist in what will be the network's largest disaster response effort in its history. More than 75 Catholic Charities agencies and Catholic organizations have each received disaster relief grants from Catholic Charities USA, ranging from \$2,000 to \$25 million to provide emergency and long-term relief efforts.

In addition to offering clean-up assistance, Catholic Charities' recovery efforts include providing victims with food, clothing, temporary and long-term housing, household goods, financial aid, gas and retail store cards, prescription medicines, mental health counseling, job placement, transportation and case management for those working with FEMA and other groups.

*Contact: Shelley Borysiewicz of Catholic Charities USA, 703-549-1390 ext. 147,
sborysiewicz@catholiccharitiesusa.org*

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