

# Women's eNews

June 22, 2006

## Assault Risk Rises in Jammed Post-Katrina Homes

By Suzanne Batchelor, WeNews Correspondent

*At the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina nears, crowded post-storm housing conditions worry police and advocates about rising risks of domestic violence and sex assault. A Louisiana project is preparing a report on preventing disaster-related violence.*



Judy Benitez

(WOMENSENEWS) – With the verified sexual-assault count among Hurricane Katrina evacuees nearing 70, police and women's advocates in the Gulf Coast area say the risk of violence against evacuee children and women is intensified by crowded, temporary housing nine months after the storm.

“We have families doubling and tripling up in substandard housing, families living with extended family members they wouldn't normally choose to live with,” said Alisa Klein, a public health and violence prevention specialist with the nonprofit National Sexual Violence Resource Center in Harrisburg, Pa. “We're seeing this increased vulnerability to sexual violence . . . When people are stressed, feel powerless, out of control, one thing we know: People do – if they already have violent tendencies – act out sexually.”

Klein's group set up a database to coordinate and verify sexual assault reports from rape crisis centers following Katrina, but she considers the 70 incidents verified so far “the tip of the iceberg,” considering that only 1 in 6 sexual assaults are reported under normal circumstances.

Nearly 10 months after the New Orleans levees failed following the storm's passage, the city's displaced cannot rebuild until new federal building regulations and funding are finalized, said Lt. David Benelli, commander of the New Orleans Police Department Sex Crimes Unit. “Many are under the same roof. You have a situation ripe for arguments, for domestic violence.”

Benelli said sex-assault charges against people familiar to the accuser were mounting. “The number of acquaintance cases lately has increased; the number of ‘stranger’ cases of sexual assault has decreased.”

## **Recommendations in Autumn**

Klein's group and the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, based in Hammond, will issue a joint set of disaster recommendations this fall aimed at preventing sex assault.

"We're developing checklists and guidelines for first responders in disaster: rape crisis centers, local police departments, medical personnel, forensic examiners, the criminal justice system, disaster-relief people," said Klein.

Klein said that although U.S. disaster relief hasn't included policies to prevent sexual violence, international groups such as nonprofit Oxfam International, based in Oxford, England, and the United Nations have been sending teams trained in treating gender-based violence to disaster areas for decades.

In January, the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a list of Katrina evacuees so it could urge those witnessing or suffering sexual violence to contact them for help, but director Judy Benitez said FEMA sent a form letter denying the request.

"We don't release the names of people who have applied for assistance from FEMA," Earl Armstrong, a FEMA spokesperson at regional headquarters in Denton, Texas, told Women's eNews. "That would be a violation of the privacy act."

Nationally, at least 50,000 households of hurricane evacuees are currently receiving FEMA rental assistance, according to FEMA officials.

About 68,000 evacuee households are housed in trailers in Louisiana; 34,000 in Mississippi; and 1,800 in Alabama, according to a Louisiana state government Web site.

## **Three Meetings in May**

Klein's group and Benitez's group held three meetings in May around the state to discuss ways to prevent disaster-related sexual violence.

"The questions we're asking are, how can people be kept safe in shelters?" the Louisiana Foundation's Benitez said. "When assault happens, how do we respond when all the normal response systems are in chaos? And, how can communities that are deluged with evacuees cope when their resources are so overwhelmed?"

Benelli, who attended one of the May meetings, expressed relief that New Orleans will no longer use the Superdome for shelter after reports of deaths, desperation and inhumane conditions among the 25,000 to 30,000 people who took refuge there last fall. When evacuation is ordered, the city now plans to bus residents needing transportation northward to shelters in upstate Louisiana and, if needed, to shelters in other states.

During Hurricane Katrina, Benelli and his unit were stationed and “trapped” along with everyone else at the New Orleans Superdome. There, in addition to handing out military Meals-Ready-to-Eat and bottled water three times a day to thousands, they aided two rape victims and found and charged the perpetrators. Benelli said rape is an underreported crime and other assaults may have occurred in the Superdome.

FEMA-supplied trailers arrived weeks and months later.

Martha Angelette of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault estimates that 1,000 people – Red Cross staff and volunteers, Louisiana Office of Emergency Preparedness workers, medical personnel, police, probation officers, prosecutors, shelter volunteers and rape crisis counselors – were invited to the three meetings last month.

A total of 126 attended, of which 32 were in law enforcement, including police and sheriff’s deputies, prosecutors, probation and parole officers.

### **Turnout Disappointment**

While welcoming the high turnout from law enforcement, Benitez was disappointed by what she considered a low turnout by people from the state’s Office of Emergency Planning and Louisiana’s Red Cross, the chief entities responsible for setting up and running the state’s shelters.

Northeast Red Cross’ acting disaster coordinator LaVonne LeBlanc said she was unaware of the project and its meetings. “Sometimes e-mail gets blocked and we’ve been changing to a new Web provider,” she said.

“We had a large shelter population but we did not deal with any sexual assault in our shelters,” LeBlanc said. Her chapter serves 11 parishes in northeast Louisiana.

“We don’t directly address sexual assault but we train to always maintain the dignity of the client,” LeBlanc said when asked about her chapter’s training and preparedness for preventing sexual violence.

“We have licensed and specially trained mental health workers and health workers, RNs, (volunteering) in our shelters. They know the signs of sex assault, abuse, and we provide them with the resources and referrals to get the help they need.”

Armed law enforcement personnel were on hand to provide security in her shelters, she added.

Cleo Joffrion Allen, press secretary for the Louisiana Department of Social Services, said its staffers receive no special training in sexual-assault prevention but that those who staff shelters have received American Red Cross training. Social service workers initially run Louisiana shelters then hand them over, in most cases, to the local Red Cross.

Allen said that this year the department will expand a color-coded badge system, used in one Katrina shelter, that will identify family members and keep them separate from single men.

“The state also plans to have specific sites for sex offenders,” Allen said. “DSS is working with the state Department of Corrections to refine how to ensure that registered sex offenders are properly identified and placed.”

*Suzanne Batchelor is a Texas-based independent journalist.*

For more information:

Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault: <http://www.lafasa.org>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center: <http://www.nsvrc.org>

Relief Fund for Sexual Assault Victims: <http://www.reliefundforsexualassaultvictims.org/>

Copyright © 2006 Women’s eNews.