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## **Battered by the Storm**

### ***After Hurricane Katrina, Abused Women's Shelter Struggles to Meet Need***

**By Barbara Raab, NBC Nightly News Producer**

NEW ORLEANS – It is a short drive from downtown New Orleans, which feels almost completely deserted on this July morning, to a two-story cinderblock building that sits just over the Jefferson Parish line. My destination is an address I have agreed to keep secret.

Though still early in the day, it is already unbearably hot and humid, typical summer weather here, so the car's air conditioning is cranking as the trip proceeds along the main drag connecting New Orleans with its adjacent parish.

At first, it appears this generic and depressing commercial strip, with its endless run of fast-food franchises, supermarkets, discount stores, and a sad-looking diner touting its \$8.85 lunch buffet, could be just about anywhere. But then, even though this area was spared the worst of Hurricane Katrina's devastation, I notice the occasional sign or banner shouting the reminder, "We're open!" giving this otherwise-generic roadway a distinct and slightly sad sense of time and place.

Before long, I come upon the building that has been described to me — an industrial-looking structure on a corner. Nobody except those who are looking for it would have any reason to notice this place. It is a secret hiding in plain sight.

As instructed, I ring the bell at Door C, and announce myself into a small, plastic intercom speaker. Later, I would learn I was being watched by a surveillance camera, my image projected on a monitor inside. The women here are expecting me, and a young, smiling staff member appears at the door and ushers me inside.

I've come to the Metropolitan Battered Women's Shelter, one of the support beams in a network of resources for battered women that itself got battered by Katrina. Almost a year later, that network is stretched thin and is struggling to rebuild itself at a time when, longtime women's advocates here say, they are facing a crisis of domestic violence made worse by the ongoing stress of the storm.

One of the women living here is Marie, a woman in her late 30s who arrived at the shelter with her four children a month earlier.

“I would be hit in the face, pushed in the side, kicked in the side,” recounts Marie, describing what she faced at home before she decided to come here.

She has agreed to be interviewed on the condition that we not use her real name. She is dressed in faded but unwrinkled jeans, and a t-shirt with the message, “Proudly Rising Into the Dream of Excellence.” On her left wrist is a gold watch, and on her ears, gold hoops. Her hair is gathered into a short ponytail. She is soft-spoken and composed, although, at times, it was difficult for her not to weep during our short conversation.

Marie says she endured a frightening and verbally abusive marriage for years to a man who became increasingly controlling and threatening. He demanded to know where she was at all times, called her constantly at her job, repeatedly accused her of lying and cheating on him, and eventually made her a virtual prisoner in their home by taking away her car. Shortly after Katrina, Marie learned her husband had been cheating on her. That’s when he started hitting her.

“He would say things like, ‘I could just bust your head open wide right now,’ and I would sit there terrified,” she says, her voice shaking.

When Marie’s husband pulled a gun on her, she knew it was time to take the children and leave.

Marie suspects the stress of the storm helped push her husband over the edge from psychological forms of torture, to physical abuse. In addition to having his secret extramarital affair exposed, Marie says his work as an industrial equipment operator brought him to jobs at some of the areas hit hardest by the storm.

“So he’s seen the real life part of it, the smells, everything that went on in the city, the real things that happened, the things we didn’t really see on TV,” Marie says. “I don’t know if that affected him in any way, but I just feel, you know, the stress he was going through, I just feel like I paid for it.”

Even though we are speaking in this safe place, Marie is grappling with a new fear. Her children are spending this day with her abusive husband, and she thinks he will pressure the older ones into revealing the shelter’s location.

She mentions this potential danger to the woman who has helped Marie navigate the last four weeks of her chaotic life, the shelter director, Dale Standifer, a 50-year-old saleswoman-turned-social-worker who before and since the storm, has been a tireless advocate for women in crisis. She herself had to flee Katrina, along with her husband, an elderly relative, and seven cats. Though now back home, she and her husband still cannot inhabit the main floor of their house, which she describes as “a science experiment,” infested with mold.

Standifer and her staff have made the inside of the Metropolitan Battered Women’s Shelter as cheery and colorful as the outside is dreary. There are 30 beds for women and their children, a

large kitchen, a laundry room, and a playroom, as well as offices, meeting areas, a children's playroom, and closets stocked with donated clothes, shoes, and toiletries – all of this for the women who often arrive with nothing more than the clothes on their back and whatever else they managed to stuff into a plastic trash bag before escaping. There have been few empty beds here since Katrina.

Providing services to this vulnerable population of women who are beaten and abused is a challenge under even the best of circumstances, and even before the storm, women in Louisiana faced dangerous odds.

In its most recent survey, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence ranked Louisiana third in the nation overall for the number of women murdered by men in what are called single-victim/single offender homicides, with a total of 56 women killed under those circumstances in fiscal year 2002-2003 (the last year for which statistics are available). Of Louisiana's female murder victims who knew their killers, according to the NCADV, 64% were either wives, common-law wives, ex-wives, or girlfriends.



Photo by Barbara Raab  
*Dale Standifer, executive director for The Metropolitan Center for Women and Children, stands in the main children's playroom. The shelter provides children with a tutor, homework assistance and medical attention.*

Now, after the storm, Standifer and other advocates say, not only are women at even higher risk of domestic violence, but escape is that much harder. And, they say, they are seeing two worrisome trends: more first-time attacks, and attacks that are more violent and vicious.

“We’re seeing a lot of women coming in saying, ‘He’s never hit me before,’” Standifer says, “and we’re also seeing women who tell us there had been violence before the storm, but it wasn’t terribly intense, but now, when they’re getting beaten, it’s like their abuser is tapping into some kind of primal rage. Instead of slapping them, they’re punching and kicking and using extreme forms of violence.”

That comes as no surprise to NCADV Executive Director Rita Smith. “We know there’s always been an increase in domestic violence and sexual assault” after major disasters like Hurricane Katrina, Smith told me on the phone from the organization’s headquarters in Colorado. In the months after four hurricanes hit Florida in six weeks in the fall of 2004, domestic violence centers reported a significant uptick in the number of people staying in shelters and calling crisis lines. And, says Smith, when law enforcement, social services, and emergency services are stretched thin, as they still are in New Orleans, “batterers know that. They know there’s not as much help available anymore, and they take advantage of that vulnerability, often without any consequences.”

While the reasons a man is more likely to turn on a wife or girlfriend after a disaster like Katrina are as varied as each one’s losses, frustrations, and anger, Sergeant Ernie Joseph of the New Orleans Police Department’s Domestic Violence Unit — down from eight to three detectives

since Katrina — says his detectives are seeing some common triggers in the cases they investigate these days.

“Losing everything that you owned. Dealing with the insurance company. Dealing with the contractors,” Sgt. Joseph says, reciting the list. “Dealing with FEMA. And living in a small, confined trailer.”

That perfect storm of anxiety and stress may have been partly responsible, authorities say, for what happened inside one of those cramped FEMA trailers in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans on the last night of July. A man was shot to death by his companion of 14 years, the mother of their two children, during what was described as an argument that got out of control in a reportedly troubled relationship.

While every one of the half-dozen advocates I talked to, along the New Orleans Police Department’s Sgt. Joseph (whose own home was destroyed by the storm) said they have no doubt that the storm pushed the problem from bad to worse, hard numbers to help illustrate the current scope of the problem are hard to come by.



Barbara Raab / NBC Nightly News  
*Dale Standifer, executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Women and Children, talks with one of the women staying in the shelter.*

Joseph offers what he acknowledges is a very approximate statistical snapshot: before the storm, his domestic violence unit was investigating about 123 calls from city residents who called police with complaints of abuse. Now, Joseph says, even though the city’s population is only about half of what it was before the storm, his detectives’ weekly caseload is about 80. And, he and other domestic violence experts in the storm zone describe what sounds like a ticking time bomb: they all say they fully expect increased demand for their services as victims who have been overwhelmed since Katrina finally decide to seek help.



Barbara Raab, NBC Nightly News  
*Computer equipment and other items from the YMCA Battered Women’s program in New Orleans lie in a heap nearly one year after the storm.*

When they do seek help, and especially if they seek emergency shelter, they will find a support network that has been both decimated and radically altered by the storm.

Before Katrina, Standifer’s shelter, Metropolitan, was one of three residential shelters for battered women in the New Orleans area; now, it is the only one still standing. And whereas Metropolitan used to serve primarily women in three parishes outside the New Orleans city limits, it now serves eight parishes, including the one comprising New Orleans, and has added a telephone hotline for victims of rape and sexual assault.

In St. Bernard’s Parish, the shelter for battered women was completely destroyed.

And in New Orleans proper, Crescent House — the shelter that had been run for nearly three decades by Catholic Charities — burned down two days after the storm, in what may have been an arson attack on a building next door. The corner lot on S. Carrollton Avenue where the Crescent House shelter once stood has since been bulldozed.

“It breaks your heart,” says Director Mary Claire Landry, who commandeered a school bus and drove the Crescent House shelter’s residents to safety before Katrina came ashore.

The New Orleans YWCA, which housed the city’s main rape crisis hotline, and also offered services to battered women, was destroyed by floodwaters that rushed in when the levees gave way. (On the day I drove by to see what remains of the Y, the huge pile of debris discarded on the sidewalk and still uncollected included a computer terminal once used by the battered women’s program.) In addition, a highly-regarded forensic nurse program for rape victims that used to be at the city’s Charity Hospital now operates out of the second floor of a former Lord & Taylor department store downtown on Poydras Street, where marble floors, polished wood, and soaring escalators still line the way to the exam area.

Those women who do escape to the area’s one remaining shelter, like Marie at Metropolitan, eventually face one of the biggest obstacles for battered women after the storm: finding a new place to live. There is virtually no affordable housing for low-income women in the New Orleans area now. Family members and friends who might have taken them in may be still scattered around the country, or are already doubling and tripling up in whatever post-Katrina living situations they were able to find and have no room to take them in, especially if they have kids in tow.

And FEMA, which provides those temporary trailers, issues only one per household, so there is no way for a battered woman who wants to leave an abusive household that has already received FEMA assistance to get her own FEMA housing. (A bill now making its way through the U.S. Senate may change that FEMA policy, but only for future disasters, not for households hit by Katrina.)

There is another uniquely storm-related reason many women are not willing to leave their abusers, no matter how bad the battering gets. Many simply cannot bear to repeat the trauma of being forced out of their homes by Katrina, especially if they were among the tens of thousands who were trapped in the hell of the New Orleans Superdome or Convention Center.

“Once somebody has been without a safe place to live, without shelter, or staying in a public shelter, they’re very reluctant to leave again even if it’s unsafe,” explains Standifer. “They may say, ‘I’m not safe in my own home, but at least it is a roof over my head.’”

Because it is especially difficult right now for women to live away from their batterers, says Landry of Crescent House, she and her staff have expanded their non-shelter services – in a different building on the corner opposite where the shelter used to be – to include battered women’s support groups, children’s groups, and individual counseling. Crescent House also provides a quiet place during the day for any woman who is staying put at home despite the physical dangers. Women and their children can come to Crescent House to relax, sleep, and just

simply be in a place where they are out of harm's way. On the day I visited, a little girl was watching "Barney" cartoons in the Crescent House living room, while her mother met with a counselor in an office down the hall.

Crescent House also helps battered women navigate the New Orleans criminal justice system, which was terribly troubled before the storm and has been "flat on its back since," as Professor Tania Tetlow of Tulane University Law School's Domestic Violence Clinic puts it. The system for getting a protective order is now back up and running, but Tetlow says it takes a bit longer than it did before the storm for the sheriff's office to serve the order on the batterer, and longer to get the order entered into the computer so that police know it exists — delays that can be dangerous, even life-threatening.

Moreover, for months, New Orleans prosecutors struggled to work on domestic violence cases in their makeshift offices in a nightclub, while the municipal courthouse where most of the domestic violence cases are adjudicated was sweltering and uncomfortable because the air conditioning did not work. For the most serious domestic violence cases, jury trials did not even resume until June.

Thus, Tetlow says, "delays in the court system make it all the harder for victims to go forward with prosecutions that are already pretty terrifying feats. And so some of our clients, because the system works so slowly, gave up in disgust, and ended up making the choice to go back to the batterer and risk their lives, because they just gave up on the thought that anybody was going to help them."

Meanwhile, out at Metropolitan Battered Women's Shelter in Jefferson Parish, where the rain from a late-afternoon thunderstorm was coming down in sheets, Dale Standifer was contemplating a different but equally unsettling thought.

"It's hurricane season again," she sighs. "Will we have to go through this again?"

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