

Women's eNews

March 3, 2006

Sex-Assault Outreach Intensifies in Hurricane Zone

By Allison Stevens, Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON, D.C. (WOMENSENEWS) – Last September, jazz singer Charmaine Neville came forward with a story about being raped on the roof of a school in New Orleans.

In the six months since Hurricane Katrina hit, the daughter of rock-and-soul star Charles Neville has become a sort of accidental spokesperson for a cause to encourage more sex-assault survivors to come forward about what happened to them during and after the storm. Now she's about to bring her call to action to a much larger audience.

"I was raped," Neville confesses in a public service announcement that will be aired in Louisiana – and perhaps in Texas and Florida and on national cable channels – in mid-March and April. "I know that many other women were raped and are afraid to talk about it. You know you don't have to be afraid. Call 1-800-656-HOPE."

Advocates hope the outreach will help victims of sexual violence get help and produce a more accurate assessment of the scale of the sexual assault that occurred in the chaotic aftermath of the storm. Good data, they say, will help people understand that abuse is an element of disasters and should be considered in prevention plans.

"We want people to get help, but we also want the rest of the country and elected officials to know and acknowledge that when you have this kind of tinderbox situation . . . that's what rape is about," said Judy Benitez, executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault in Hammond, La., a coalition of state crisis centers that is paying for the ads with a grant from the government. "So, what can we do in the future to make sure this doesn't happen and so people can get help as quickly as possible?"

Early Counts Grew From Fear

Rumors repeated in print and on television news shows created initial fears of rampant rape and murder in the Louisiana Superdome and the nearby convention center, where trapped evacuees had little access to basic necessities.

Early accounts of more than 200 deaths in the Superdome were reduced to a total of six, none of which was crime-related, said David Benelli, lieutenant commander of the sexual crimes unit at

the New Orleans Police Department. Benelli's unit received only two reports of sexual violence in the Superdome and five outside of it in the entire month of September, he said.

Activists such as Benitez, however, believe the actual number of sexual assaults was higher and think the advertisement could encourage more victims to come forward with their stories and get help from professionals in the areas of service providers, law enforcement and medicine. Those professionals, she hopes, will in turn report the incidents on a new online sexual-assault database.

The database has so far received reports of 45 incidents of sexual assault in the wake of the hurricane, all of which have been independently verified.

Launched in October, it was created by a coalition of groups that found the hurricane left them unprepared to identify people who might be suffering from sex assault and respond effectively after the hurricane hit, said Cathy Nardo, an information specialist at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in Enola, PA.

The online address for the database has been disseminated to advocates, law enforcement officers, prosecutors and medical personnel around the country; it has not been publicized to protect the integrity of the data.

Nardo's group created the database along with the Louisiana foundation and other activist, law enforcement and research groups. They hope it will provide better tracking of sexual violence after a hurricane or any future emergency.

Picture Still Incomplete

Benitez believes the current total on the database is incomplete, given the numbers of people affected by Katrina; about half a million people were displaced by the storm.

Sexual assault is a notoriously underreported crime, especially during larger crises, advocates say. And the reluctance of some victims to come forward was compounded by the chaos in the Gulf Coast, where law enforcers were unable to function at normal levels, shelters did not offer the kind of privacy needed to facilitate the reporting of crimes and victims didn't know that they could file "courtesy reports" in police districts outside their own, Benitez said.

Benelli concedes that the number of sexual assaults is probably higher than the police department's official count. Still, he described suspicions of widespread sexual violence in New Orleans as an "urban myth" spread by fearful residents trapped inside the shelters.

Activists, however, believe the database will eventually show that the reports of sexual violence aren't all fiction. "We're assuming it's going to take time for this really to develop," Benitez said.

The federal government estimates that 2,000 registered sex offenders left the Gulf Coast during the hurricane and may have evaded government tracking.

Whatever the numbers show from Katrina, the database will certainly help in the next crisis, Nardo said. "This is something that is applicable to any other future disaster."

Six-Month Anniversary

The ad campaign and database are two of several steps being taken at Katrina's six-month anniversary as lawmakers, activists and independent experts review what went wrong in the public response to the disaster.

The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network in Washington, D.C., is working on a pre-existing plan to launch the nation's first secure, Web-based hotline offering live help around the clock via an instant-messaging process. They hope real-time electronic communications will increase privacy for victims in shelters and increase access when phone lines are jammed, said network spokesperson Lynn Parrish.

"After Katrina, we thought this would have been a great resource if we already had it up and running," Parrish said. "If there's a similar situation in the future, this is a good way to go online and find information about what they can do and also get help."

Congress released a scathing review of the federal response two weeks ago. On Wednesday, a video showing President Bush saying on Aug. 28 that the federal government was "fully prepared" to handle a possible breach of the levee system was widely publicized. When Katrina hit four days later, Bush told ABC News that no one could have predicted what was coming, apparently ignoring the message of the earlier video.

Allison Stevens is Washington bureau chief at Women's eNews.

For more information:

"Efforts to Track Rape Emerge Between Hurricanes":

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2460/> "Rape Reporting Procedure Missing After Hurricane": <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2448/>

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

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