

Posted on Sun, Aug. 27, 2006

Area groups 'really' ready to handle disasters

Last year's service helped prepare local organizations

BY MARK RICE
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While working in two other states during her 20-year American Red Cross career, Sharon Lyon heard people say, "If we reach out to evacuees, they'll stay, but we don't want them to."

A year ago this week, when about 3,500 evacuees from the Gulf Coast came to the Columbus area to escape Hurricane Katrina, Lyon heard a different message here.

Countless officials and volunteers asked, "How can we help?"

"Evacuees were calling their cousins and telling them to come to Columbus, because they'll treat you really well here," said Lyon, executive director for the West Central Georgia Chapter of the Red Cross. "That was a big thing to hear."

And lasting. As recently as June, the city reported 87 families who were receiving a federal housing grant for Katrina evacuees remained in Columbus.

Now, the folks who organized the warm welcome and hospitality continue working to improve. After the shelters closed in September, instead of only congratulating each other, agency leaders committed to doing better.

In fact, that spirit contributed to the successful service last year, they said.

"One of the most amazing things about this community is that when we see a need, we pull together," said Linda Hyles, director of community initiatives for the United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley.

"Sometimes, working with large groups of agencies and the city, there's some politics," Lyon said. "People have to have it this way or that way. But we were very lucky none of that surfaced. People were willing to set aside those issues. I was just overwhelmed how well the city and agencies put themselves out there."

Making improvements

Representatives from some of those agencies met in November to assess their performance. They formed a group -- the Greater Columbus Area Disaster Resource Coalition -- to stay prepared for the next time evacuees come here.

The coalition charged itself with two immediate projects, Hyles said:

- Develop a disaster resource guide. It will have contact information for local agencies that can help evacuees. It will be kept current on an electronic database, but it won't be printed until evacuees are expected to arrive, so the estimated 5,000 copies needed won't be outdated and wasted.
- Write a how-to handbook summarizing what agencies learned about setting up a one-stop operations center to provide evacuees services.

A week after the Red Cross opened its shelter in the Benning Park Recreation Center, it collaborated with other local public and private agencies to set up a one-stop operations center at 1043 Third Ave., in the former Page Scramton Tucker Sprouse & Ford law office, now owned by St. Luke United Methodist Church.

Metra Transit ran a bus route covering the one-stop center, the shelter and the triage center St. Francis Hospital set up at 3940 Rosemont Drive.

As many as 275 evacuees stayed at the shelter. Although many quickly found apartments after a few days, they still needed help with essential services -- and they needed help finding that help.

"It became clear that if we really were going to help them," Lyon said, "we'd need to have all the different agencies under one roof."

Columbus developed the first one-stop center for evacuees in the state, Lyon said.

Lynnette Gross, director of the Columbus Consolidated Government's community reinvestment program, managed the one-stop facility designed to help evacuees with housing, education, health care, public assistance, counseling, transportation, employment and recreation.

"I think the one-stop shop was tremendous," Hyles said. "People worked really hard under a lot of stress. We tried to be as organized as possible."

That effort included morning meetings to improve the service before it opened each day. Although the one-stop center was considered a success for the nearly three weeks it operated, officials have to locate another location, because St. Luke School renovated the building to teach its middle grades there.

"St. Luke was wonderful to provide the building, security and some volunteers," Lyon said.

The Red Cross already has secured verbal agreements to use one of two vacant buildings for the one-stop center, Lyon said: the former Hughes Supply warehouse on Veterans Parkway and the former Service Merchandise in Cross Country Plaza.

Training volunteers

The Red Cross is trying to retain the approximately 600 local volunteers who helped Katrina evacuees. Training classes, including a shelter simulation, are keeping the volunteers in the Red Cross network and prepared for the next time they're needed. Before the hurricane, the chapter had only five or six nurses trained, now it has about 100, including 20 to 25 meeting every month, Lyon said.

The United Way created a fund for disaster relief at the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley. This fund was started with about \$1,500 left over from the \$20,000 donated to the United Way for Katrina relief, Hyles said. After the United Way's allocation board gave most of the money to agencies overloaded by helping evacuees, the board decided it needed a fund to set aside for the next time, she said.

List of goals

Officials listed the following ways they intend to improve service for the next time evacuees come to the Columbus area:

- Increase the number of trained shelter managers. Last year, managers worked 12-hour shifts and quickly burned out.
- Create an in-take form for evacuees to fill out at the one-stop center, like they do at the Red Cross shelter. Filing the evacuee's name, address, date of birth, Social Security number, and names of dependents and pets, will help unite families and perhaps save more lives. This also could decrease the chances of people posing as evacuees and fraudulently using the aid.
- On the back of the in-take form, create a checklist of agencies in the one-stop center, so evacuees and the agencies trying to help them all know which services they receive.
- Computerize the in-take system. Last year's one-stop center had the information only on paper.
- Designate one volunteer coordinator, so one person knows all the volunteer needs of the participating agencies.
- Designate one media relations coordinator, so one person can speak for all the participating agencies.
- When the disaster plan goes into effect, know who calls whom at each agency to get everyone mobilized.

"Hopefully, we won't have another disaster," Hyles said. "But if we do, we'll really be prepared."

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