

PROGRESS REPORT

Disaster and Recovery Along the U.S. Gulf Coast: Oxfam America's Response to the Hurricanes

Introduction

Six months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita carved a path of destruction for homes, businesses and lives all across the U.S. Gulf Coast, it is now commonly acknowledged that these two events constitute the single largest natural disaster our country has ever faced. The devastation was massive in scale and scope: more than 1,000 confirmed dead and an estimated 3,000 missing; approximately 300,000 homes rendered uninhabitable; a major metropolitan area left nearly lifeless; 100 square miles of wetlands lost, perhaps permanently; an entire regional economy upended; and an environmental disaster of unknown proportions. The hurricanes affected an area roughly equivalent to the territory of Great Britain, stretching nearly 400 linear miles from Port Arthur, Texas to Mobile, Alabama and including more than 7,700 miles of vulnerable coastline.

Compounding the impact of the natural disaster was the distressingly inadequate official response. Images of people stranded without help for days, coupled with the newly exposed deep and systemic poverty in the region, prompted Oxfam's rapid decision to engage in a major relief effort, our first ever within the United States throughout our 35-year history of humanitarian work around the world

The enormity of loss and destruction, the evidence of massive institutional failure, and the knowledge that our extensive international experience had much to offer all factored into Oxfam's decision to respond. But we also acted out of the recognition that this disaster had targeted two of our nation's poorest states and, as with disasters everywhere in the world, took its highest toll on the poorest and most vulnerable populations in its path. Finally, our long history of engagement with local partners in the region meant we were able to react quickly to identify those communities that faced the greatest immediate needs.

Oxfam's Engagement: First Two Months

Our assessment teams in Louisiana and Mississippi, deployed within the first few days, confirmed the almost unfathomable scale of destruction and the glaring absence of official assistance, especially for the poorest communities living in East Biloxi and in the rural parishes of southern Louisiana. From the beginning, we responded with direct support to partner groups so that they could meet immediate humanitarian needs, while we also pursued advocacy efforts designed to direct state and federal attention to the most vulnerable communities in the region.

We quickly partnered with existing organizations such as local churches and the state National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and worked alongside local voluntary leadership to create an urgently needed coordination center in East Biloxi. Meanwhile, we brought leaders from the affected communities to Washington, D.C., to stress the importance of an immediate Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Red Cross presence in the poorest neighborhoods along the Gulf Coast.

In Louisiana, we listened as local partners voiced serious concerns about the many toxic chemicals and oil that had been spilled in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We provided immediate support to local groups for the distribution of thousands of health and safety kits that would help protect residents as they returned to clean up their flooded homes. We also brought in public health experts from within our own staff and from the Harvard Humanitarian Institute who called attention to the major public health issues in press conferences and testimony before state and federal legislative committees.

In the first two months of our engagement, Oxfam provided \$514,000 to 14 partners in the two states as well as to regional and national partners providing essential services in support of local work. Grants were made to long-term partners such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and Southern Mutual Help Association, newer partners such as the NAACP and the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, and brand-new organizations such as the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center. One-time emergency support was also provided to six organizations meeting critical human needs in the wake of the disaster¹.

Not only did we provide critically needed grant dollars that made a difference to thousands of individuals and families, we also deployed staff from our own domestic program and humanitarian response departments, coupled with international staff who brought significant experience from other major natural disasters around the world.

Highlights of these first two months include:

1. With critical financial, legal and advocacy support from Oxfam, the **East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center** successfully forced the government and private agencies to devote greater resources and attention to low-income communities which were neglected in the initial weeks after the disaster.
2. Our emergency grants made it possible for thousands of pounds of relief supplies, medicines, and food to be distributed in the days and weeks following the storm. Moreover, the local partners distributing this aid, such as **Southern Mutual Help Association** and **Louisiana Environmental Action Network** in Louisiana, the **Mississippi Association of Cooperatives**, and

¹ See Attachment I for a complete list of grants and partner support funds for FY 05 and 06.

Biloxi's **Main St. Baptist Church** were able to reach tiny rural and isolated communities scattered along southern Louisiana's bayous, as well as provide critically needed services to residents of East Biloxi and Gulfport long before the arrival of any other national emergency response agency. Our Louisiana partners were also instrumental in getting emergency supplies of hay and other feed distributed to farmers and ranchers who faced the possible loss of their farm animals in the wake of the storm.

3. Recognizing a crisis affecting immigrants along the coast, Oxfam provided critical support to MIRA, the **Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance**, including placing a full-time Oxfam humanitarian field worker with the organization for a total of three months. Our emergency grant helped fund an organizer in Biloxi to advocate for immigrants' rights, report and follow-up on cases of contract and labor abuses, and ensure that the often-invisible communities housing thousands of Latinos and other non-English speaking immigrants along the Gulf Coast received essential humanitarian assistance in the wake of the hurricane.
4. In Louisiana, Oxfam America worked side by side with local and state organizations in designing and distributing thousands of health and safety re-entry kits to enable residents to begin the clean-up of their homes. As of this writing, with OA funding and support, the **Louisiana Environmental Action Network** has distributed tens of thousands of protective respirators, clothing, goggles and bottle of bleach free of charge and pressed the government to take on this important service.

Oxfam's Response: Months 3-6

Using our international experience as a guide, Oxfam developed a unique approach along the Gulf Coast that continues to characterize our response even as the work moves from the most urgent emergency phase into a long-term strategic recovery period.

Our work has clearly not been confined to providing funds, although a cornerstone of our effort is our ability to direct responsive and flexible grants to meet community needs. We are proud of the uniquely comprehensive nature of our work, characterized by staff resources in the field, a strong communications and advocacy team, and purposeful marshalling of outside resources from the worlds of philanthropy, academia, and public service:

1. **On-the-Ground Presence:** We have placed four new field staff in the region, backed by a policy advisor in Washington, D.C., and an emergency program manager in Boston. These staff not only identify and support key local partners, but are intimately engaged in organizing, advocacy, and communications work. For example, Oxfam joined forces with local groups in the early weeks to hold East Biloxi's first town hall meeting to air residents' concerns. A flyer generated by our Biloxi-based representative to highlight the need for equitable distribution of

Community Development Block Grant funds garnered more than 1000 signatures and was shared with state legislators and the governor's office. Staff based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Jackson, Mississippi are active participants in state-based coalitions working to draft recovery plans that account for the special needs of low-income homeowners, renters, the elderly, and other often-overlooked groups.

2. State and National Communications: Our media and communications team has generated a host of stories at the national and local level in print and broadcast outlets including the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and NPR. In addition, our Web site, which receives about 65,000 visitors a month, features a range of original stories reported from the field as well as photographs and slide shows. Our National Outreach team has responded to requests from across the country and helped organize more than 40 local fund-raising events, raising a total of approximately \$30,000 for our emergency response. National Outreach is also reaching out to its extensive network of college students and Oxfam-affiliated campus groups to raise awareness and activism on behalf of the recovery.
3. A National Policy Presence: Oxfam, long known for its work on international poverty and development, has become a key player in national coalitions advocating for comprehensive and equitable rebuilding in both Louisiana and Mississippi. Research carried out in Washington has been shared with our state-level staff, immeasurably strengthening their ability to advocate on behalf of partner concerns. Our policy team has arranged and accompanied partner visits with House and Senate legislators and staff members, and Oxfam has been invited to submit testimony for hearings at both the state and federal levels. Oxfam recently published a six-month briefing paper highlighting the enormous poverty issues along the Gulf Coast and recommending specific housing policy measures to meet the needs of all affected residents, especially the most vulnerable.²

At the six-month mark, another \$109,323 had been committed in grants and partner support for a total of approximately \$625,000 to ten long-term and eight short-term or emergency partners and allies. Relationships we have brokered with other, like-minded philanthropic groups have yielded another \$200,000 to date in direct contributions to partners, leveraging our funding and drawing additional attention and resources to the region.

As our network of partners has grown in the region, so has their impact:

- With OA's support, MIRA - the **Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance** - has grown from a once-tiny, low-budget organization staffed entirely by volunteers to a well-funded, nationally recognized organization drawing repeated media and legislative attention to the widespread abuse of immigrant rights in the region.

² *Recovering States? The Gulf Coast Six Months After the Storms*, available at http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/briefing_papers/recovering_states

Written congressional testimony submitted by MIRA's Executive Director Bill Chandler and Oxfam America program officer Guadalupe Gamboa to the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina. In a recent Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing investigating the Mississippi and Louisiana Governors' response to Hurricane Katrina, Senator Daniel K. Akaka, (D-HI) cited the 200 complaints of contract abuse filed by MIRA with the U.S. Department of Labor. These complaints resulted in perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the organization's unflagging efforts to protect immigrant and workers rights: 106 immigrant workers recently received \$142,000 in back wages from one of the largest private contractors engaged in Mississippi's rebuilding.

- The state **NAACP** in Mississippi has been a consistently strong voice advocating on behalf of low-income residents who stand to be excluded as redevelopment proceeds. Not only was Derrick Johnson, chair of the NAACP state conference, invited to be a member of Governor Haley Barbour's commission providing input and advice on the recovery, but Johnson also traveled three times to Washington to meet with legislators and policymakers in the executive branch. Together with the Mississippi State Legislature's Black Caucus, the NAACP championed a bill to create a legislative oversight committee that would advise the governor on the distribution of federally allocated Community Development Block Grant funds. Oxfam has provided important research and strategic support to the NAACP through our staff based in Jackson, Mississippi and Washington, D.C..
- In southern Louisiana, two field stations have been set up by **Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA)** to reach rural residents living in dozens of bayou communities across a 11-parish area³ (an area of approximately 16,000 square miles). SMHA has partnered with voluntary groups from around the country to mobilize 250 volunteers and direct them in the clean-up effort; to date 150 homes have been cleaned up or are in process, with another 120 on a waiting list. Several small, family-owned businesses are back up and running with support from SMHA's recovery grants (funded by Oxfam America), and plans are now underway to begin the rebuilding effort. SMHA also plans a major expansion of its financial services in light of the dramatic increase in needs.
- Also in south Louisiana, Oxfam has brokered an innovative collaboration between local partner **Terrebonne Readiness and Assistance Coalition (TRAC)** and architects and students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Together, the two groups are creating an innovative prototype home design that is affordable, hurricane-resistant, and able to be elevated above the dangerous flood levels in the bayous. TRAC has also partnered with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and The Elks Lodge of Houma to provide long-term volunteer housing, worksite management, and volunteer construction supervision for the rebuilding effort. The "Good Earth Volunteer Village" is already a temporary home for 80 volunteers, and will host continuous volunteer crews through March of 2008. Working with a very small staff, and helped by community volunteers,

³ Eastern Sector: Lafourche, Terrebonne, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard parishes;
Western Sector: Iberia, St. Mary, Vermilion, Jefferson Davis, Calcasieu and Cameron parishes.

TRAC has also enabled almost 1000 local residents to file claims with FEMA; most of these families, facing language, age, income, and other barriers, might never have been able to navigate the complex process of filing for assistance without TRAC's hands-on support.

- Acting as a coordinating point for at least six major voluntary relief organizations operating in Biloxi, the **East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center (EBCRC)** has catalogued damages and directed volunteers in cleaning up more than 1,700 houses to ready them for rebuilding. Today, EBCRC has partnered with architects, planners, and academics to undertake a comprehensive community planning process that will allow residents to envision and design the future of their neighborhoods. Oxfam's initial funding has helped position the EBCRC to convert itself into a Community Development Corporation in order to spearhead redevelopment and economic revitalization for the devastated neighborhoods hurt most by Hurricane Katrina.
- Oxfam is working on a major report, scheduled for release in April, being produced in collaboration with local environmental groups in Louisiana such as **Louisiana Environmental Action Network**, the **Harvard Humanitarian Institute**, and the **National Resources Defense Council**. The report outlines the serious environmental justice issues and public health risks posed by the hurricanes. These risks reflect not only the hurricanes' aftermath of ruptured gas and oil lines, as well as toxic spills, but also the long history of environmental neglect and chemical hazards that had adversely affected poor and minority communities. The report, to be shared with state and national legislators, identifies critical policy steps that must be taken to recover from the storms and provide essential protections for human and environmental health.

From Response to Recovery: the Road Ahead

Long after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have disappeared from national headlines and news stories, the rebuilding effort will continue. It must continue, because it is unacceptable to imagine anything less. It will take a concerted and long-term national response, characterized by substantial investment from public and private sources alike, to replace the hundreds of thousands of homes, repair the damaged infrastructure, re-invigorate the thousands of small businesses, and rebuild local schools, hospitals, parks, and playgrounds.

Oxfam America intends to remain engaged with our local partners as they confront the challenge of not only rebuilding, but improving upon what was lost in the wake of the storm. The recovery effort actually represents an unprecedented opportunity to mobilize resources on behalf of a more promising future for all those living along the Gulf Coast. We will do all we can to ensure that all residents, regardless of race, income, education, age, or gender, have a voice in the rebuilding process and can seize the chance to design better, safer, healthier communities.

Our plans include:

- *Continued state and federal advocacy* to target desperately needed federal housing dollars to the communities that need the most help, especially low-income households, renters, the elderly, and those who occupied public housing prior to the storms.
- Timely support, technical assistance, and brokering of external relationships that *help fragile community efforts strengthen and flourish*. We will continue to prioritize support for minority and immigrant communities in historically poor neighborhoods that stand to benefit most (and have the most to lose) from a comprehensive redevelopment effort.
- Co-sponsorship with state and national partners of *a series of town hall meetings* that will help link local residents to the key policymakers and ensure a voice in the decisions that will determine their future.
- *Ongoing communications* that mobilize our extensive national constituency on behalf of regional needs and ensure local residents are not forgotten.

The six-month anniversary of the twin hurricanes that so devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast is a solemn occasion to remember those who lost their lives, those who fled, and those who may never be able to return to their communities. Hundreds of thousands of people whose homes once lay somewhere along the 378-mile long route from Port Arthur, Texas to Mobile, Alabama are currently scattered to virtually every state in the country. For them, and for all who are connected to them, the six-month mark is cause for recalling the grief, loss, and uncertainty that has been with them since August 29, 2005.

For Oxfam America, this occasion also offers an opportunity to look back at what we have achieved to date, as well as to plan the work that awaits us in the coming months and years. The story of what we have helped to bring about in devastated communities all along the Gulf Coast is one we share with considerable pride – *it is clear that Oxfam's intervention and subsequent direct engagement have made a difference in the lives of thousands of affected residents*. Although our resources are limited in the face of the region's tremendous needs for assistance, our reach has been amplified dramatically by the work of the many partners and allies with whom we have collaborated over the past six months.

Together with determined residents returning all across the region to rebuild their communities, Oxfam is committed to doing all we can to ensure a comprehensive and equitable rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.

ATTACHMENT I

Oxfam America Partner Profiles Gulf Coast Emergency Program

MISSISSIPPI

East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Centre – Biloxi, MS

The EBCRC was created in collaboration with Bill Stallworth, Ward 2 City Councilor, Biloxi, and other civic leaders. The EBCRC creates a space where community groups and civic organizations could coordinate their relief efforts, specifically collecting information on needs assessments and to provide affected people with information on how to access aid programs. Councilman Stallworth is the only African American member of the Biloxi City Council, and his neighborhood, East Biloxi, has been chronically underserved since the hurricane. His mostly low-income, African-American and Latino constituency will face immense challenges as relief turns to recovery down South.

Primary Contact: Bill Stallworth (228) 435-7180

Link to Testimony to Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, December 6, 2005:

http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/research_reports/research_paper_2005-12-06.5203094379

Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance – Jackson, MS

MIRA is an alliance of union, religious, civil rights, community and immigrant activists to advocate for rights for immigrants in the legislature and public agencies. MIRA began their mobile human rights outreach effort in Gulfport with funding for the rights worker and the rented RV provided by Oxfam America. MIRA has been in touch with Oxfam America about focusing press attention on the specific vulnerabilities of a Spanish-speaking population, many of whom are undocumented. They will work to get vital information about much needed resources and services to immigrant workers who labor in the hospitality, shrimping and other industries in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. MIRA will conduct outreach and provide direct assistance, advocacy and mobilization to respond to the needs and rights of immigrant workers in Mississippi.

Website: <http://www.yourmira.org/>

Primary Contact: Bill Chandler (601) 594-3564

Link to Testimony to Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, December 6, 2005:

http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/research_reports/research_paper_2005-12-06.4237647120

NAACP – Mississippi Chapter – Jackson, MS

The NAACP has been a strong voice in advocating for the equitable response to the hurricane. Our grant to them helped them deliver immediate relief resources, especially to underserved communities in the region between the Gulf Coast and Jackson. NAACP will also play a strong advocacy role around equitable distribution of resources in the reconstruction effort. In order to do

this, they need to get their local offices in Biloxi and Gulfport, MS back up and running and hire a media outreach/communications staff person who will be dedicated full time to the Hurricane Katrina response and reconstruction efforts.

Website: www.naacp.org

Primary Contact: Derrick Johnson (601) 353-6906

Turkey Creek Community Initiatives (TCCI) – Gulfport, MS

Turkey Creek Community Initiatives (TCCI) is an innovative non-profit community development corporation engaged in the comprehensive revitalization of coastal Mississippi's impoverished, historic, and ecologically important Turkey Creek community and watershed. TCCI relies on a combination of community leaders and experts to foster community participation in achieving its mission. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, TCCI will be focusing on rebuilding Turkey Creek in a way that ensures an equitable voice for all.

Website: <http://www.turkey-creek.org/>

Primary Contact: Derrick Evans (228) 863-0847

Main Street Baptist Church – E. Biloxi, MS

Main Street Baptist Church is a dynamic center of activity that exemplifies a people-to-people relief response. In the immediate aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the Main Street Baptist Church emerged as a leader in supplying food and emergency supplies to the residents of East Biloxi. Oxfam's grant provided supplies and stipends for staff to run an emergency soup kitchen.

Primary Contact: Pastor Kenneth Haynes (228) 432-8648

Our Lady of Fatima Parish – E. Biloxi, MS

Our Lady of Fatima is a parish working with Biloxi's undocumented Latina community. Father Paddy Mockler of Our Lady of Fatima estimates that 80% of the community is undocumented and this has impacted its ability to organize. The church has set up an impressive distribution centre which has received donations from parishioners and others. Oxfam's grant allowed Our Lady of Fatima to purchase prescription drugs for East Biloxi residents who had no other way to get their medication since the main pharmacies were completely destroyed by the hurricane.

Website: <http://www.fatima-biloxi.com/>

Primary Contact: Mary F. Ford 228-861-4397

Visions of Hope – Biloxi, MS

Visions of Hope is a local housing organization, will enable homeowners to obtain vouchers to buy materials needed to make their homes watertight before another storm passes through as well as providing direct aid (food, water and shelter) to hurricane victims. Visions of Hope has distributed \$200 vouchers to homeowners. Oxfam's support will help them buy supplies to rebuild and refurbish their office.

Primary Contact: Sarah Walker (228) 806-0813

LOUISIANA -

Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) – Baton Rouge, LA

LEAN is an environmental rights organization which has worked in the low income rural areas in southern Louisiana for 19 years. They have been providing relief supplies and environmental testing for water safety in communities in six Louisiana parishes south and east of New Orleans. The population in these parishes is widely dispersed in small, largely low-income communities of fishers and farmers whose livelihoods have been increasingly threatened by coastal development, commercial fishing and the oil and chemical industries in the area. These south eastern parishes were hit particularly hard by both Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005 and then Hurricane Rita on September 24, 2005 but have received almost no assistance from FEMA or the Red Cross. LEAN's contacts in these communities requested that LEAN provide assistance in: direct material provision of water, food and cleaning supplies and independent sampling for water quality. Our grant to LEAN will help them respond by distributing relief supplies, doing water sampling and informing the population about the risks of returning home.

Website: <http://www.leanweb.org/>

Primary Contact: Marylee Orr (225) 928-1315

Southern Mutual Help Association – New Iberia, LA

SMHA is a rural development association working in Louisiana that advocates for changes in policies and structures that create and maintain severe poverty in southern Louisiana. SMHA provides loans for low-income families to secure homes, and start small businesses and develops programs for adult and youth leadership, health and sustainable agriculture. In response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, SMHA has launched a "Rural Recovery Response", which aims to broker funds to rebuild rural Louisiana, and help residents access aid.

Website: <http://www.southernmutualhelp.org/>

Primary Contact: Lorna Bourg (337) 367-3277

Terrebonne Readiness and Assistance Coalition (TRAC) - Houma, LA -

TRAC is a community and faith based non-profit corporation serving Louisiana Parishes since 1992. Its mission is to assist individuals, families and communities to rebuild following a disaster, to help navigate recovery plans for those affected, strengthen our planning and preparation for future disasters and empower people organizing to dramatically improve life in our communities. In addition to disaster preparation they are currently housing 3000 evacuees.

Website: <http://www.trac4la.com>

Primary Contact: Peg Case (985) 851-2952

FLORIDA

Farm Worker Association of Florida (FWAF) – Apopka, FL

The Farmworkers Association of Florida is a membership organization of more than 6,000 farmworker families from predominately Mexican, Haitian, African-American, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran communities. Its goal is to empower farmworkers throughout the state to respond to and gain control over the social, political, economic, and workplace issues affecting their lives. FWAF focuses on community and labor issues, training, leadership development, organizing, and advocacy. FWAF received a small grant to go to Mississippi to help train MIRA staff and others

on how to access the FEMA system and other sources of aid.
<http://www.farmworkers.org/fwafpage.html>