



Challenged by the Storms



The American Red Cross Response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma





Ready to Respond

Even before media images of destruction and despair jolted the nation, trained Red Cross responders were already in action. As Katrina gained intensity and charged towards land, numerous highly-trained, quick-response leadership teams moved into the Gulf Coast region. Nearly 200 emergency response vehicles (ERVs) from 48 states were dispatched, several mobile kitchens were pre-positioned to prepare hot meals and hundreds of shelters were opened for fleeing evacuees. In the weeks that followed, more than 225,000 men and women donned Red Cross disaster vests, working around the clock to provide shelter, food, water and other immediate necessities for millions of storm survivors. "There is a power in the Red Cross symbol that draws people who are looking for help and comfort,"

volunteer Vicky Davenport discovered in Florida. "It makes me proud to be wearing a Red Cross vest."

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Many disaster workers were victims themselves. "Our Red Cross volunteers and employees had a duty and responsibility to help others first and they carried it out regardless of their personal losses," said Paige Roberts, executive director for the Southeastern Mississippi Chapter, after Katrina swept away both her home and her office. "In times of disaster, a person's true character comes out. It was a challenge for all of us and everyone was reduced to the basics to just survive, but we're better and stronger as a result."

From southeastern Texas to the Florida Keys, Katrina, Rita and Wilma left nearly 400,000 homes uninhabitable, creating the largest need for short-term sheltering in U.S. history. The Red Cross opened nearly 1,200 shelters across 27 states and the District of Columbia. Recreation centers, churches, schools and agencies partnered with the Red Cross to provide 3.4 million overnight stays from August through December.

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On Christmas Eve, a young hurricane survivor named Mikey brought tears to the eyes of first-time American Red Cross volunteer Haamid "Happy" Johnson when he told Johnson what he hoped Santa Claus would bring him for Christmas.

While most boys wanted toys, a fire truck or a bicycle, Mikey had something more practical in mind. "He told me, 'I want a FEMA trailer for my family,'" said Johnson, who spent almost a month delivering hot meals in the hardest-hit area of New Orleans, where Mikey's family lived. "That showed me the power and impact of what happened here."

Johnson, 20, arrived in New Orleans just two days after finishing a three-month internship in the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence.

The Georgetown University junior drove an emergency response vehicle (ERV) in New Orleans, working up to 12 hours a day. Although he had never worked harder in his life, he never thought about the long hours or hard work. "You think of the people you're helping and putting smiles on people's faces," he said.

"Wherever there's destruction, we have an obligation to give back, because we have so much, and so many resources in this country," he said.

“The Red Cross has been feeding us every day. If it hadn’t been for them, I think we all would have starved.”

Evelyn Turner of Hackberry, La., wasn't alone in her time of need. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, millions of people were desperate for safe shelter, food and water. Their fellow Americans reached out to them through the organization they have relied on for 125 years: the American Red Cross.

As a record 15 hurricanes roared out of the Atlantic Ocean in one year, Red Cross shelters welcomed evacuees to shelters all across the country. Red Cross relief workers, 95 percent of them volunteers, fanned out to feed, comfort and care for millions of storm survivors. Generous donors from across the country and around the world made it possible to mount the largest disaster response in American history. It was a response that tested the limits of the Red Cross.

The epic hurricane season of 2005 was a defining chapter in American Red Cross history.

For more than a century, the American Red Cross has been at the forefront of helping Americans prevent, prepare for and respond to disasters. From the tragic Johnstown, Pa., flood of 1889 to tens of thousands of yearly house fires to the San Francisco earthquake in 1989, the framework for compassionate humanitarian response was firmly established. Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, however, affected more people, over a larger area and to a more profound extent than any previous disaster, challenging the organization as never before. Katrina alone pummeled an area the size of Great Britain. It demolished cities and towns, knocked out transportation, communication and utility infrastructures and led to the dismantling of a major American city: 80 percent of New Orleans was flooded.



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