



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

In storm, N.O. wants no one left behind **Number of people without cars makes evacuation difficult**

Sunday, July 24, 2005

By Bruce Nolan
Staff writer

City, state and federal emergency officials are preparing to give the poorest of New Orleans' poor a historically blunt message: In the event of a major hurricane, you're on your own.

In scripted appearances being recorded now, officials such as Mayor Ray Nagin, local Red Cross Executive Director Kay Wilkins and City Council President Oliver Thomas drive home the word that the city does not have the resources to move out of harm's way an estimated 134,000 people without transportation.

In the video, made by the anti-poverty agency Total Community Action, they urge those people to make arrangements now by finding their own ways to leave the city in the event of an evacuation.

"You're responsible for your safety, and you should be responsible for the person next to you," Wilkins said in an interview. "If you have some room to get that person out of town, the Red Cross will have a space for that person outside the area. We can help you.

"But we don't have the transportation."

Officials are recording the evacuation message even as recent research by the University of New Orleans indicated that as many as 60 percent of the residents of most southeast Louisiana parishes would remain in their homes in the event of a Category 3 hurricane.

Their message will be distributed on hundreds of DVDs across the city. The DVDs' basic get-out-of-town message applies to all audiences, but the it is especially targeted to scores of churches and other groups heavily concentrated in Central City and other vulnerable, low-income neighborhoods, said the Rev. Marshall Truehill, head of Total Community Action.

"The primary message is that each person is primarily responsible for themselves, for their own family and friends," Truehill said.

In addition to the plea from Nagin, Thomas and Wilkins, video exhortations to make evacuation plans come from representatives of State Police and the National Weather Service, and from local officials such as Sen. Ann Duplessis, D-New Orleans, and State Rep. Arthur Morrell, D-New Orleans, said Allan Katz, whose advertising company is coordinating officials' scripts and doing the recording.

The speakers explain what to bring and what to leave behind. They advise viewers to bring personal medicines and critical legal documents, and tell them how to create a family communication plan. Even a representative of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

Animals weighs in with a message on how to make the best arrangements for pets left behind.

Production likely will continue through August. Officials want to get the DVDs into the hands of pastors and community leaders as hurricane season reaches its height in September, Katz said.

Fleeing the storm

Believing that the low-lying city is too dangerous a place to shelter refugees, the Red Cross positioned its storm shelters on higher ground north of Interstate 10 several years ago. It dropped plans to care for storm victims in schools or other institutions in town.

Truehill, Wilkins and others said emergency preparedness officials still plan to deploy some Regional Transit Authority buses, school buses and perhaps even Amtrak trains to move some people before a storm.

An RTA emergency plan dedicates 64 buses and 10 lift vans to move people somewhere; whether that means out of town or to local shelters of last resort would depend on emergency planners' decision at that moment, RTA spokeswoman Rosalind Cook said.

But even the larger buses hold only about 60 people each, a rescue capacity that is dwarfed by the unmet need.

In an interview at the opening of this year's hurricane season, New Orleans Emergency Preparedness Director Joseph Matthews acknowledged that the city is overmatched.

"It's important to emphasize that we just don't have the resources to take everybody out," he said in a interview in late May.

A helping hand

In the absence of public transportation resources, Total Community Action and the Red Cross have been developing a private initiative called Operation Brother's Keeper that, fully formed, would enlist churches in a vast, decentralized effort to make space for the poor and the infirm in church members' cars when they evacuate.

However, the program is only in the first year of a three-year experiment and involves only four local churches so far.

The Red Cross and Total Community Action are trying to invent a program that would show churches how to inventory their members, match those with space in their cars with those needing a ride, and put all the information in a useful framework, Wilkins said.

But the complexities so far are daunting, she said.

The inventories go only at the pace of the volunteers doing them. Where churches recruit partner churches out of the storm area to shelter them, volunteers in both places need to be trained in running shelters, she said.

People also have to think carefully about what makes good evacuation matches. Wilkins said that when ride arrangements are made, the volunteers must be sure to tell their passengers where their planned destination is if they are evacuated.

Moreover, although the Archdiocese of New Orleans has endorsed the project in principle, it doesn't want its 142 parishes to participate until insurance problems have been solved with new legislation that reduces liability risks, Wilkins said.

At the end of three years, organizers of Operation Brother's Keeper hope to have trained 90 congregations how to develop evacuation plans for their own members.

The church connection

Meanwhile, some churches appear to have moved on their own to create evacuation plans that assist members without cars.

Since the Hurricane Ivan evacuation of 2004, Mormon churches have begun matching members who have empty seats in cars with those needing seats, said Scott Conlin, president of the church's local stake. Eleven local congregations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints share a common evacuation plan, and many church members have three-day emergency kits packed and ready to go, he said.

Mormon churches in Jackson, Miss., Hattiesburg, Miss., and Alexandria, La., have arranged to receive evacuees. The denomination also maintains a toll-free telephone number that functions as a central information drop, where members on the road can leave information about their whereabouts that church leaders can pick up and relay as necessary, Conlin said.

.....

Bruce Nolan can be reached at bnolan@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3344.