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Report: Help of nonprofits running dry

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Published: Oct 16, 2007

The nonprofit sector's response to the 2005 hurricanes has been unprecedented, but, with money for volunteer services running low and "Katrina fatigue" running high across the nation, it is time for the government to take the ball and drive the recovery, a report released Monday stressed.

"The scale of the devastation is so vast in Louisiana and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast that only the government has the capacity to handle significant rebuilding," the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government said in a joint report.

"The nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery. Rather, it was to buttress the governmental response, to fill in the gaps left by government," the PAR/Rockefeller report said.

It has been more than two years since Katrina and Rita hit in August and September of 2005, respectively, and predictions are the recovery will continue for another five to seven years, PAR and the Rockefeller Institute said in their latest "GulfGov Reports."

"For the recovery to proceed in a timely and substantial way, government must take the lead while the nonprofit, community-based, and faith-based organizations play a strong supporting role with their focus on the human element of the disaster," the groups said.

PAR President Jim Brandt, co-principal investigator for the GulfGov Reports project, said the scope of the nonprofit sector's work in helping the Gulf Coast region rebuild has included national foundations investing millions of dollars in the recovery, out-of-town groups making frequent rebuilding trips, and local groups lobbying for policy changes.

"There is no question that the nonprofit community is helping to push the recovery forward," he said.

The report said, among other things, that the 2005 storms reinforced the critical need for nonprofit groups to have a disaster response and recovery plan and revealed that funding sustainability for those groups is a serious problem.

"It is critical that we take heed of the lessons learned here so that we can be better prepared for the next time," Rockefeller Institute co-Director Richard Nathan, co-principal investigator for the project, warned.

The Corporation for National and Community Service reported in August that in the two years since the hurricanes, more than 1.1 million people have put in 14 million volunteer hours — or more than \$260 million in services — helping the affected areas recover. The national Foundation Center also has reported that institutional donors — corporations, foundations, and business and professional groups — contributed more than \$1 billion in money and in-kind services between August 2005 and June 2007 to aid in the recovery.

The PAR/Rockefeller report said housing continues to be "an almost insurmountable barrier" as thousands of residents in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama remain in FEMA trailers and thousands more remain displaced

around the country. The lack of adequate and affordable housing, in turn, contributes to labor shortages, the report said.

“The primary reason for all of this is money. Simply put, the flow of money designed to help residents and local governments rebuild their cities, homes and neighborhoods has been bottlenecked at all levels — federal, state and local,” PAR and the Rockefeller Institute said.

“Further compounding the problem is the onset of Katrina fatigue. As time passes, more and more people are beginning to question just how long the federal government should provide aid and how much that aid should be.”

Still, volunteers continue to come and nonprofit groups continue to provide services to the affected communities.

“But those services require money, and the money is running out,” the report said. “Without new sources of funding, representatives of several nonprofit organizations said they anticipate having to cut services.”

The report said a potential benefit of having volunteers continually returning to the affected areas is that when they go home, they can spread the word that much work remains to be done.

“That, in turn, could counter some of the Katrina fatigue effects and encourage more donations,” the report suggested.

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