

Testimony of

Jayne Wright

Food Bank of Central Louisiana

Before the

Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Of the

United States Senate

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Senators Enzi and Kennedy:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion about the response of the Voluntary Agencies to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. It is difficult to capture everything in a few minutes. There are so many things that happened with this response, more good than bad. However, that is not the picture that many choose to paint.

The majority of my time was spent in the State Emergency Operations Center (EOC), in Baton Rouge prior to the landfall of Katrina until mid October. My responsibilities as the President/Chair of Louisiana Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (LAVOAD), were to represent the group in the EOC, (handling requests from the parish governments, other state agencies, state officials, voluntary organizations, assist in the implementation of the donation management plan, coordinate the flow of donated goods and volunteers until the donations coordination team was in place), and facilitate the weekly meetings of the LAVOAD groups.

In addition, to the aforementioned duties, my volunteer job, I am also the Executive Director of the Food Bank of Central Louisiana, my day job. We are a member of America's Second Harvest, the Nation's Food Bank Network. I serve on the National Council of the group.

My Food Bank is located in shelter sector A, the initial area for evacuees to be sheltered within the state. Our job is to supply the shelters during the time that they are open, whether they are part of the Red Cross system or not. During these storms, we supplied food to 49 groups that were not part of the Food Bank network or the Red Cross network. In addition, our team provided food to more than 12,000 families that were staying in private homes or hotels/motels.

During the height of the chaos, communication was difficult at best. The only system that did not go down was the blackberry and I did not have one, most volunteers did not. Eventually the land lines, email and cell phones came back, but in those first couple of weeks we had to send volunteers out to areas where we could not reach the local Office of Emergency Preparedness. They reported back and we sent supplies accordingly. The parishes that were able to communicate sent requests as did state agencies at an unbelievable pace. We responded and sent volunteers and supplies all across the state. Fortunately, the food banks had a good stock on hand, the Southern Baptist travel with initial stock, so, we had access to food immediately.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service was on site within a few days to offer more food. Of course, the food in the schools is made available to those shelter operations, but so many shelters were located in places that had never served as shelters before. There was a much greater need for congregate feeding and household distribution.

America's Second Harvest, the Nation's Food Bank Network (A2H), responded with unprecedented support from other food banks, food donors, and trained volunteers. Food and grocery products were flowing into staging warehouses and the local food banks very quickly.

Adventist Community Services came in to operate the one of two multi-agency warehouses that we set up in New Iberia; A2H ran the other in Baker. Donated goods were shipped to these locations in addition to the four remaining food banks in Louisiana. Community based organizations, both VOAD and non VOAD, and local governments, including first responders, accessed the supplies from these points.

An example of this type of situation was during Hurricane Rita, one rural parish OEP sent in a request for food for 6,000 people that had evacuated to Sabine Parish. We responded by forwarding the request to the nearest food bank and that team delivered food to them within a few hours.

LAVOAD responded to requests for supplies and resources within our own network as well, coordinating shipments of supplies to warehouses and agencies as needed. We worked beside the American Red Cross team in the EOC and helped whenever they had a request for assistance. We were able to work with the American Red Cross to get services into parishes in Southwest Louisiana where there had been little service or communication with the Voluntary Agencies before.

We also worked closely with the state Department of Social Services to provide supplies to the shelters that they were coordinating. Many baby products, toiletries, blankets, food and other supplies were delivered to their sites across the state.

As the storms quieted, and the efforts to place people into transitional housing progressed, the LAVOAD team stepped forward to take donated goods and put "living kits" together. These kits contained basic household goods and linens that were placed in the trailers at the FEMA staging site in Baton Rouge.

There are many more examples of team work between the Voluntary Organizations, local and state government, and community based organizations. We are not without challenges. Communication is probably the biggest, followed by education of the government agencies with regard to their responsibilities in the state plan, education of government at all levels with regard to VOAD and logistics. Logistics are always a challenge in this type of situation.

Both the efforts of the LAVOAD team and the Food Bank are ongoing. The pace has shifted toward long term recovery with 18 committees formed across the state to address unmet needs of their communities. We continue to support the parishes that are still in the stages of repopulation.

Part of this support has come through a grant that we received from the Corporation for National Service to provide AmeriCorps*VISTAs to serve with the Long Term Recovery Committees. The grant is in the beginning stages, but will be an invaluable resource as the work of these groups moves forward.

Many of the LAVOAD members have or are going through debrief conferences or after action reviews at this point. Our state organization will be holding its state conference later this month. It will include such an exercise to point out positives and negatives of our combined response and make recommendations on how we can grow and build upon our experiences of the last six months.

Personally, this has been a life changing experience. I have seen things that I had never dreamed of and pushed myself beyond anything that I ever thought I could do. These storms have made me reevaluate myself and my life and what is truly important. My faith in God has given me the strength to honor my commitment to serve the people of my state and my organizations, the Food Bank and LAVOAD, when it felt as if everything was falling apart.

There are some very special people that worked in the state EOC. I am not speaking of the brass or the elected officials, the people that were there all hours of the day and night finding a way to make things work for weeks and months. They are heroes in my book and have gotten more criticism than recognition.

No one group can be the “end all, be all” solution to a disaster. It takes everyone, and it is imperative that we remember that everyone has something to offer and that as a responder; you do not have all of the answers. Sometimes it is easy to get into a mentality of “We have always done it this way.” Being open to new ideas can be one of the most powerful resources we have.

Education is a powerful tool as well. Many of the groups within government, on all levels, did not comprehend the role or the capabilities of Voluntary Organizations. Of course, this situation has rewritten all of the records for every group. We have all responded beyond what we thought we were capable of doing. More evacuees/survivors were sheltered, fed, clothed in this operation than ever before.

One way to better structure the approach of government is to include the VOADs in their planning processes and to educate those employees that are involved in disaster response at each agency about Voluntary Organizations. Another approach would be to include the VOADs in training and exercises.

Traditionally the activities of the VOADs have centered on the response to natural disasters. Oklahoma City and September 11th have certainly changed the arena in which we may be called to respond. Voluntary Agencies need more training with regard to man made disasters, biological and chemical weapons, etc. Pandemics are another area where training will be invaluable.

Communication between the government entities and the Voluntary Agencies needs to be addressed. Clear channels need to be outlined.

Again, thank you for including me in this conversation. I think it is imperative that these types of discussions happen as we go forward.

Sincerely,

Jayne Wright
Executive Director