



## **Statement of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)**

In the past, too many communities have dismissed the needs of people with disabilities. With the recent disastrous hurricanes on the Gulf Coast, this dismissal often has proved deadly. If towns and cities viewed individuals with disabilities as valued members of the community, they would ensure that they were at the table when important decisions were being made – such as emergency preparedness. Thirty plus years after the integration of children with disabilities into public schools and 15 years after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act and people with disabilities are still often forgotten.

In every state and community, there are disability advocacy programs such as the Protection & Advocacy (P&A) network and the Independent Living Centers which have the capacity to address issues of emergency preparedness. There also are a wide variety of advocacy organizations that address the needs of people with disabilities – such as The Arc, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the National Mental Health Association, etc. As decisions are made, people with disabilities and representatives of disability organizations must be at the table.

Individuals with disabilities make up well over 20 percent of the population in most of the areas on the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama coasts hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina. Individuals with disabilities are also disproportionately represented among the poorest of the poor. The impact of the storms and their aftermath was disproportionately negative for them due to lack of community planning; lack of accessible transportation; and the failure of first responders, the Red Cross and other shelter providers to recognize their special needs and be willing to address them. In addition, individuals with disabilities were often:

- separated from family members and caregivers, mobility devices, assistive technology, service animals, and critically needed medications;
- improperly referred to institutional settings in violation of every precept of disability policy; and
- turned away from, or not provided, reasonable shelter, or segregated in so-called “special needs” shelters.

In addition, organizations such as the federally mandated and funded Protection and Advocacy agencies in the affected states were improperly denied their legal access to shelters and/or individuals with disabilities.

Throughout this entire ordeal, FEMA has been woefully uneducated as to the needs of individuals with disabilities and unprepared to address these needs. Six months after the disaster struck, the Advocacy Center – Louisiana’s federally mandated P&A for

individuals with disabilities – Mississippi Center for Justice, the Welfare Law Center, Inc and the Public Interest Law Project filed a class action suit in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana against FEMA. The suit challenges FEMA's failure to provide accessible temporary housing – often in the form of trailers – that is usable by people with disabilities.

The Congressional Charter and the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross Movement promise assistance without discrimination or partiality, but guided solely by the needs of those seeking assistance. Unfortunately, this was not the case in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as the needs of individuals with disabilities were too often overlooked or not properly met. As an organization with a federal charter, the Red Cross *must* be better equipped to address the unique needs of individuals with disabilities and their families in a truly impartial manner. Indeed, natural disasters do not discriminate – neither should emergency responders.

NDRN encourages public policy makers to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are adequately addressed in all future emergency preparedness plans and at all levels – the needs of individuals with disabilities must not be ignored by those responsible for establishing state and local emergency preparedness plans.