

Search Editorial Content

New Orleans
CITYBUSINESS

UP to the MINUTE NEWS

new ORLEANS.
INTERACTIVE
Reader Question of the Week

No login required.

[Weekly Print Edition](#)

[Up to the Minute](#)

[Legal Notices](#)

[Photo Gallery](#)

[Archives](#)

[List of Newsstands](#)

[Daily E-Mail Update](#)

▶ [Sign Up](#)

[XML](#) ▶

[Book of Lists](#)

[Digital Edition](#)

Other Publications

[Daily Journal of Commerce](#)

(Daily Construction News)

[North Shore Report](#)

Unlikely partnerships ease health care crisis

by Patrick Strange

12/12/2005

Even before Hurricane Katrina flooded hospitals and displaced scores of licensed physicians, New Orleans struggled to care for its own.

Before the hurricane, more than 24 percent of Orleans Parish lived below the poverty level — about double the national average — and more than a quarter of roughly 445,000 parish residents had no health insurance. Now, with several acute care facilities out of operation and its two public hospitals ruined, providing health care to the poor is more challenging than ever.

While city and state officials scramble to reinstate emergency services, a variety of grassroots organizations have stepped up to administer medical care.

"We really overestimated the response from major relief organizations and the government," said Noah Morris, an emergency medical technician from Rhode Island responsible for overseeing a volunteer relief clinic called the Common Ground Collective in Algiers.

"We thought we'd run a first-aid station for a couple of days and then it wouldn't be needed ... but that turned out not to be the case."

Operating from makeshift clinics in parks and people's homes, independent volunteers treat returning evacuees and those who never left. Community health workers, registered nurses, medical technicians, physical therapists and doctors from across the country are working without pay.

Morris, along with the Common Ground Collective volunteers, began tending to the sick days following Katrina's Aug. 29 landfall. The group treats more than 100 patients a day and relies solely on private donations for supplies.

Health crisis

Nearly three months after the storm, the Collective is still the only consistent source of health care in the community.

Scott Mechanic, a health volunteer who traveled from Philadelphia to aid in the recovery, was one of the first to assist at the clinic. He is an experienced relief worker who has provided care during social justice campaigns and also as a sexual assault advocate but he said he was

not fully prepared for the long-standing health crisis that has plagued New Orleans since well before the storm.

"People are coming in with chronic conditions that have never been diagnosed," he said. "We're seeing people who have not been to a doctor in 20 years. We're talking to diabetics who have never been told how to manage their disease."

When asked how long he intends to stay in New Orleans, Mechanic and others say they will stay as long as needed. The clinic has applied for grants that would allow locals to take the reins but many of those who rely on the clinics for medical care fear operations will cease once volunteers head for higher ground. If the clinics fold, community citizens and volunteers say they wonder how the city will manage.

Dr. Erin Brewer, medical director of the Office of Public Health for the state Department of Health and Hospitals, said she welcomes all volunteers here to help but she also realizes a more permanent cure is needed for the city's chronic condition.

"When it comes to providing care for people who are uninsured, volunteers are helping us greatly," she says. "Obviously that is not a situation that is sustainable so we are looking for sustainable solutions to that problem."

Brewer said Hurricane Katrina complicated the state's health care crisis.

"There were thousands and thousands of people in the New Orleans area who didn't have access to care before the storm," she said. "The care we are trying to provide now is the same care we were trying to provide before. We didn't have the money before and we don't have the money now."

United groups

The lack of resources united groups normally divided along political, religious and racial lines.

Mechanic said he teamed with other health care volunteers working out of a local mosque when he arrived in New Orleans. An U.S. Army captain later approached the group from the 82nd Airborne Division who came to investigate days after the storm.

"When he asked what we were doing, we were pretty open about who we are — a bunch of anarchists operating out of a mosque run by an ex-Black Panther member providing free health care," Mechanic said.

The U.S. Army soon began delivering medical supplies to the clinic and even started picking up the injured and dropping them off on the mosque's front steps.

In Washington Square Park in Faubourg Marigny, health care workers note similar cooperation among diverse volunteers. Living out of tents and working 16-hour days, Christian groups, members of the Teamsters union and political activists from several states are aiding hurricane victims.

Organizers praise the cooperation among the independent groups but remain fearful the lack of initiative that plagued the city public health system before the storm will continue.

Rob Savoy, a search and rescue worker from Colorado who handed out free food and water to returning evacuees, said the people of New Orleans will be left to fend for themselves if groups like his leave.

"We need to be here for at least several more months because the need for medical care is not going away," Savoy said.

With no timetable for rebuilding New Orleans hospitals and clinics, volunteers say New Orleans residents remain dependent on goodwill in the meantime.

"I am very grateful that they are here," says Norma Lombard, a New Orleans woman who lost her job and her health insurance during Katrina. "Everybody is very generous and willing to help. ... Help is here if you need it."

[\[go to home page\]](#) [\[previous page\]](#)

Copyright © 2006, New Orleans Publishing Group. All Rights Reserved. 111 Veterans Blvd., Suite 1440 Metairie, LA 70005

Phone: 504.834.9292 Fax: 504.832.3550 Email: terry.oconnor@npg.com [Terms & Conditions of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

