

Lasting impact

Local agencies had to adjust

BY PEGGY KREIMER | POST STAFF REPORTER

In Northern Kentucky, the efforts to meet the needs of hurricane survivors resulted in a new network of social service agencies that will be ready to mobilize emergency help much quicker because of their hurricane response this summer.

The Northern Kentucky Social Services Network of about 20 agencies grew as the needs to help evacuees arose, said Rina Saperstein of Welcome House in Covington, who is the network's spokesperson.

What started as a one-time emergency response has its first official community-wide event scheduled for Saturday at Holmes High School cafeteria - "It Could Happen to You," a resource fair for hurricane survivors, people living in poverty, and anyone else who could need help in a crisis.

The Northern Kentucky Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which is a member of the new Social Services Network, is sponsoring the fair with fellow network members sharing their services.

People will learn how to access food, housing, clothing, counseling, help with utility bills, health services, programs for children, the elderly and families, and other services in the community.

"When you're living in poverty, every day can be a crisis," said Saperstein. The need for instant cooperation and collaboration among agencies that the hurricane crisis spotlighted can hit any community without warning, she said.

As the first hurricane refugees arrived at the homes of family members or at local churches, immediate needs were housing, clothes, food and information.

"This group started because the Housing Authority of Covington was putting aside units for Katrina victims and wanted to make sure associated services that they would need were in place," said Saperstein.

Several agency representatives met together around a table, and the table kept growing.

"Once we sat down we liked being able to share the information and share the needs," she said.

"One agency agreed to be the central point for large-scale in-kind donations, another for donations like beds.

"We found a lot of physical donations went down south, but we were up here trying to find help. We have to keep meeting our normal needs. The question was how do we go beyond our normal network and increase our resources," Saperstein said.

The agencies created a single information sheet for hurricane survivors and donors, listing central contact agencies to get help or to make donations. Landlords were directed to call the Northern Kentucky Housing and Homeless Coalition. Donors of goods, the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission. Those offering services call the Northern Kentucky Area Development District.

Church groups offering to volunteer were directed to Welcome House in Covington or United Ministries in Erlanger.

The Northern Kentucky Area Development District's Homeless Management Data Base, used to track the services to a transient homeless population, became a crucial tool, said Saperstein.

As housing organizations like the Northern Housing and Homeless Coalition, the Newport Housing Authority and the Housing Authority of Covington worked to find available apartments, other agencies rallied to furnish those apartments and get food into the refrigerators.

Email became a powerful tool for sending out pleas for specific items like beds, a kitchen table, baby clothes.

"The number of actual refugees has not been that large," Saperstein said. "We see more people in crisis every day for a number of different reasons. But the hurricane refugees have special needs. They don't know the community as well. Most of them came here because they have some family ties, so they have some support, but a lot of them don't know what's available."

"We were getting ready for a lot more families in crisis," said Saperstein. Now that the group has developed a working system, the members have decided to keep meeting quarterly.

The coalition gives other organizations a central place to go to contact social service agencies. Saperstein said a group planning a health fair contacted the coalition and several member agencies will be participating.

"Katrina really raised an issue that this could happen to you - you could lose everything and need the support of the community," Saperstein said.

That support in a communitywide crisis could be a little easier to access now, because of Katrina and Rita, she said.