Voices from New Orleans

Workers who helped rebuild after Hurricane Katrina offer advice to their compatriots in Haiti.

By **Olya Schechter** | Newsweek Web Exclusive
Feb 2, 2010

Though both disasters were tragic, destructive, and heartbreaking, there are big differences between the situation in post-earthquake Haiti and life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. While the destruction from Katrina was intense, displacing tens of thousands of citizens, the earthquake in Haiti destroyed almost the entire city of Port-au-Prince, leaving almost 100 percent of the city's population homeless. Katrina made landfall in a wealthy, industrialized nation; the earthquake hit the capital of an impoverished country already struggling to survive. "Katrina was different because [many aid workers] were from outside and had no emotional ties to the community," says Andre Filiatrault, a structural engineering professor at the University at Buffalo. Filiatrault worked in New Orleans after Katrina and is currently providing support in Haiti. "Here, the people who are providing help, the U.N. members themselves, have lost family members. Over 150 U.N. employees have been killed, and people providing health care have to cope with their own loss as well. It is a very difficult situation."

But there is one big parallel: while the entire world responded in the days after Katrina with offers of money, supplies, and emotional support, the long-term job of rebuilding the city fell to a small, dedicated group of aid workers and responders. The same will be true in Haiti. Some of the leaders of the New Orleans reconstruction effort share lessons learned and provide advice to those seeking long-term solutions in Haiti.

Dr. Mark Peters, president and CEO of the East Jefferson General Hospital in Louisiana:
From what we've seen in New Orleans, the most effective solutions are the ones that are envisioned and executed by local communities. Folks on the ground that have the local knowledge should take the lead on the recovery process. The best thing that the international aid organizations can do is to provide

resources and expertise to a limited extent, but it is the people on the ground that are really going to have to be in the driver's seat.

John Matessino, president and CEO of the Louisiana Hospital Association:
One of the things that we saw with Katrina is that there were many people wanting to help. We certainly had

no shortage of volunteers. In fact, we had people just showing up. It was very difficult to coordinate volunteers. When you have a country like Haiti, with little structure within their health-care delivery system, it must be very difficult to coordinate.

It is very important to make sure that there is some physical and mental downtime for the volunteers and caregivers to get some rest. Because what they see there right now is horrible. I remember with Katrina, I was working long days for two straight weeks, and the first day I got off I went to two funerals. That was tough.

Thom Pepper, director of Common Ground Relief, Inc. , a nonprofit organization providing short- and long-term support for hurricane victims in the New Orleans area:
The locals have got to have jobs. One of the problems we faced in New Orleans was that there were so many workers who were from out of the area that there were no real jobs for the local residents.

It is important to provide jobs locally to empower residents and have as much building material produced and purchased locally in order to provide jobs, expand the local economy, and increase tax revenue. Hopefully that will happen in Haiti, instead of having paid workers from the Caribbean or all over the world displacing eager and hardworking Haitians who can help their own country.

Besides food and water, some living conditions must be provided. But you also can't make people live in tents forever. We've learned that lesson here in New Orleans. Following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans allowed residents to return to areas that the city was ill prepared to police and where municipal services were limited. The FEMA trailers, meant as temporary shelters, became home for many people for several years. The logistics of housing and feeding a million or more residents is a monumental challenge, but it is something that Haiti's friends and neighbors must address. Letting residents return to live in uninspected, unsafe structures with no electricity and no water is just as bad as leaving people to live in tent cities in hurricane-prone areas.

Daniel Rothschild, managing director of the State and Local Policy Project at George Mason University's Mercatus Center:
(Rothschild coordinates research on state economic policy and directs the Gulf Coast Recovery Project. His team has collected more than 450 hours of interviews with people on the ground involved in the rebuilding process.)

The big lesson that people should take away from Hurricane Katrina and from what we have seen in the Gulf Coast is that every success is a result of a small local initiative. Every big plan that has been proposed by any level of government has failed. We view these communities as an opportunity to start them again from scratch, new and better off. But there are deep ties; there is a lot of knowledge that is embedded within formal and informal community organizations. And it is important for us to listen to that.

Ashley Shelton, vice president of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation:
One of the lessons we've learned was that oftentimes the area that is the hardest hit or is the most prominent gets a lot of the attention, but people forget the rural areas. It is important to remember the people outside of the city who are in as much need of food and water [as people in urban areas]. It is important to treat people with dignity in disaster so that the disaster does not become something that defines them. We always talk about how resilient people of Haiti are. And people are tremendously resilient, but it does not mean that they

are never in pain.

Find this article at
http://www.newsweek.com/id/232907

© 2010