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Disaster Relief in Alabama

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April 24, 2008

## **Disaster Relief in Alabama**

By: Kelly Adams

### **Introduction**

The morning is like any other game day. A sea of orange and blue floods the streets as Auburn prepares for another Saturday on the Plains. The 87,451 seats of the stadium are quickly filled, pushing Auburn to the fifth largest city in Alabama on game days.

Fans' smiles quickly turn to scared faces as 200 men dressed in black all around the stadium stand up and open fire with their assault weapons. Screams are heard from outside the stadium as people scramble to get out of their seats to safety. Those tailgating outside wonder what's going on, and its some time before they realize the tragedy befalling the city.

Of course, the terrorists escape and the orange and blue of the stadium is mixed with red, leaving mass confusion and pain. Now it's time for someone to step in for immediate help.

Something like this scenario has never happened in Auburn, and hopefully never will. If it does, the Voluntary Organization Active in Disaster (VOAD) will be ready. VOAD created the above simulation that lasted about three days to prepare its members for the worst kind of disaster, an attack by terrorists. VOAD consists of representatives from United Way, American Red Cross, and the Salvation Army, to name a few. VOAD coordinates planning efforts by these organizations and convenes on the site of the disaster to provide immediate help to those affected.

**What's a disaster?**

Disasters not only include terrorist attacks, but also hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and house fires. In order to be prepared for these natural disasters, VOAD meets quarterly to drill, practice, and get familiar with new procedures used for disaster relief.

Vickie Dearing, teacher and head of Rape Counselors of Lee County, found herself in the middle of a disaster of her own.

"My husband and kids and I had gone to Columbus, Ga., for the day over Christmas break, and while we were gone my neighbor called to tell me our house was on fire, and that it was pretty much all gone," said Dearing. "Before we even got to the house, we could see flames from the roadway. We still don't know what caused it."

Dearing and her family stayed with friends for the first night and then started looking for temporary housing. Friends went shopping and bought everything they would need to get back on their feet. The church where Dearing worked also provided toys for the kids, clothes, and kitchen items, etc. "Because it was a week after Christmas, all the kids' toys were gone. So their schools collected money and bought them more toys. It was truly amazing the way everyone reached out to us."

**Close to Home**

Dearing also received help from American Red Cross of Lee County. They came in with supplies for the family's immediate needs until their insurance was set up. The Red Cross is extremely instrumental during disaster relief. They must wait for a declaration or call from the fire/police department, then provide the emergency needs for those affected. This includes giving

them credit cards with a pre-measured balance and paying for hotel rooms. The Red Cross asks for volunteers all the time, offering free courses on certifications and public relations during times of disaster.

Alabama also has Community Emergency Response Teams placed all over the state for immediate help during disasters. CERT teams are educated about disaster preparedness and response skills such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization and medical operations. The teams are comprised of volunteers of all ages. Some are retired and can respond out of town with only short notice. In CERT and other organizations, volunteers can expect to be gone for at least two weeks for natural disasters if deployed out of town.

According to Jennifer Ryan, executive director of Red Cross of Lee County, public affairs plays a crucial role in times of disaster. "People think public affairs during disasters is the *last* thing that should be thought about. But it's really one of the first things! If no one knows about it, how can they volunteer to help?"

Becky Benton, executive director of United Way of Lee County, agrees with Ryan. "We really had a problem with Hurricane Katrina and the clothes that were donated. There were piles and piles of clothes coming in, and then the rains came." According to Benton, the rain soured every single article of clothing, making the donations almost useless. "If we can get the word out on what we do need and what we don't need, it can really help out with what people send. Sometimes we have 100 pairs of socks and no shoes!"

## **Working Together**

United Way is instrumental in raising money for disaster relief efforts. Donations come in from businesses and individuals, and United Way decides what non-profit organizations to give the money to. Red Cross receives 22 per cent of its funds from United Way, and other organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Literacy Coalition, and Rape Counselors of America also benefit from their contributions.

Benton just happens to be the president of VOAD in Auburn, and is very active in disaster relief in Lee County. During Katrina, Benton described one elderly male who came into one of their shelters looking lost. "He was a dapper old man, dressed to the nines. He was wearing a gray suit and white tennis shoes. I thought he looked lonely, so I went over to him and struck up a conversation. He told me that his wife wanted to stay behind with their house as the hurricane struck, but he wanted to find safety. In the end, he had to leave her behind because he knew he would die if he didn't." Benton's not too sure what happened to the man. Eventually he became lost in the sea of survivors that needed help.

With victims like these, counseling is often needed to get past disasters. The Red Cross offers regular counseling for up to a year after a disaster, and offers it on anniversaries, holidays, etc. in order to make sure the community stays on its feet.

Leigh Warren, health and community services manager of Red Cross in Lee County, is convinced that disaster relief efforts have changed for the better over the years. "I've really seen an improvement. VOAD has played a big part in that, and our certification classes have, too. New improvements are still being made today so that we can be better prepared when disaster strikes." Not only do organizations help out family needs after disaster, but companies such as Alabama Power step in for the mechanical repairs.

Every year Alabama Power gives money to United Way and the Red Cross. They partner especially close with these organizations during times of disaster. Kendal Adams, operations manager in Auburn, is routinely shipped to other locations where disaster strikes to turn the power back on. "We go in within the first couple of days that a hurricane or tornado strikes so we can get the power running again," said Adams. "Power is crucial to getting people back on track with their lives." After Hurricane Ivan struck in 2004, Adams was sent to Virginia. He said people in Virginia were so thankful to APCO for deploying employees to help that they officiated a "Hug a Power man Day." Adams said he received about 50 hugs that day.

### **Despite Efforts, Recovery Still Slow**

Chris Washburn, a survivor of Katrina, sought refuge in Alabama. He is still trying to regain his life, but he said the memories of the storm will haunt him forever. "When the hurricane was over, everything was silent. The screams didn't start for a while. My neighbor, John Rollins, was dead. He had been found crushed beneath a tree in his front yard and suffered severe head injuries. I've never seen a woman so sorrowful as his mother on that day."

According to Washburn, the surviving Rollins family moved to Mississippi somewhere to seek help. Washburn hasn't heard from them since. His story is one of countless others. New Orleans is still facing many problems as a result of Katrina today, including shattered water lines, lack of money to support an NBA team, and shut down radio/television stations.

### **Work Sources**

- Kendal Adams, operations manager at Alabama Power  
(334)-444-9518
- Jennifer Ryan, CEO of Red Cross of Lee County  
(334)-749-9981
- Becky Benton, CEO of United Way of Lee County  
(334)-745-5540
- Vickie Dearing, Rape Counselors of Lee County  
(334)- 524-2968
- Leigh Warren, Health and Community Services Manager Red Cross  
(334)-749-5540
- Chris Washburn  
(334)-501-6231

### **For More Information:**

- Small Business Administration  
[www.sba.gov/localresources/disasteroffices](http://www.sba.gov/localresources/disasteroffices)
- National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster  
[www.nvoad.org/about](http://www.nvoad.org/about)
- United Way of Lee County  
[www.unitedwayofleecounty.org](http://www.unitedwayofleecounty.org)
- Lee County Red Cross  
[www.leeredcross.org](http://www.leeredcross.org)