

## Katrina

On Saturday September 10th, the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) made a request to Kaiser Permanente, through the State of California Office of Emergency Services, for a team of physicians willing to volunteer their services to provide medical care to the Hurricane Katrina survivors in Houston being housed in the Astrodome and the Convention Center. I had the privilege of serving on the first Kaiser Permanente team that was sent out.



The team arrived in Houston on September 13th tired from traveling, but eager to start working. We were welcomed by Mayor White, and Captain Jean Migliaccio, Health and Human Services. We were sworn in as Federal employees and deputized to provide medical care and relief to the hurricane survivors. Captain Migliaccio outlined our mission and shared statistics with us that were astounding. Hurricane Katrina caused the evacuation of up to 1.5 million people from their homes. Houston had absorbed over 200,000 "new Houstonians", quickly and in the gracious manner that the South is so famous for. Once the Houston Astrodome was full, a second emergency shelter was set up at the George C. Brown Convention Center. Additionally 48,000 evacuees were housed in local motels and hotels. Running 24 hours a day, the medical clinic set up by the University of Texas saw up to 1200 patients a day. We had an opportunity to walk through the George C. Brown Convention Center where some of the evacuees were housed. The facilities were clean with various services available including adult primary care, mental health, pediatrics, vision and dental.

The first wave of Hurricane Katrina volunteers was made up of both local medical personnel and a percentage of the 1400 uniformed care providers. The City of Houston has been trying to transition the survivors from the Superdome, the Convention Center and large shelters into apartments and housing in the community. It was anticipated that the survivors would seek care at some of the

40 public clinics in the Greater Houston area. The burden on the health care system is worsened by the fact that the existing population is bearing unprecedented stress, exemplified by statistics from Houston EMS that show that calls for cardiopulmonary arrest went up 50% 2 days after the hurricane, and have remained at that level for each of the 14 days since. In addition about 30% of the population of Houston is under or not insured. In anticipation of this increased demand on the health care system our team was deployed to various community clinics to assist. Some clinics like the Asian Community Center saw an increased influx of Katrina patients that required clinic hours to be increased by 800%!

Mary Boyd, a Social Worker from KP West Los Angeles and I were deployed out at the Houston South Central Community Clinic, which serves a predominantly African American population. The first day there were only two Katrina patients and that number gradually increased to ten the next day. It was clear to both of us that the patients in this area would not be accessing care at the clinic in the first few weeks and the care needed to be given to them where they lived and got assistance. We discussed this with Ms. Gloria Cage, (folks are formal at this clinic when they address people) the clinic's charge nurse who has been a clinician in a variety of roles for the last 36 years and still continues to work. In addition we got the clinic's Executive Director, Ms. Angie Young and its Outreach Coordinator, Ms. Griffin to get in our car, and we toured several of the community's churches that gave shelter to the survivors. We were impressed by the genuine warmth with which Houstonians welcomed and cared for the evacuees from Louisiana. Inquisitive as we were we wandered into the kitchen of St. Matthew's Parish and were treated to hot water cornbread (my first time).

During our tour of the community we came across St. Agnes Church. This church has three places of worship, with the largest one capable of holding 14,000 people! The Red Cross and FEMA had picked this site as their processing center and on a given day up to 12,000 evacuees passed through the facility.



The center had some capacity to provide medical care, but it was clear to us that they could use assistance. Through our suggestion and the daily Mayor's meeting and through Ms. Angle's contacts we were able to procure a mobile medical unit from the City of Houston. The unit is a very large trailer with one exam room and two other areas to see patients. The unit had its own generator, and thank goodness, air conditioning!



Amazing new friends helped at the  
St. Agnes Mobile Medical Unit

The weather was hot and humid with temperatures up to a 102, with sudden downpours. The St. Agnes facility opened at 9:00 AM but often evacuees started lining up at midnight or 2:00 AM to get a good place in the line. The hurricane had spared no one; there were African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Indians and Caucasians. There were babies, and the elderly with canes and walkers, all waiting patiently in the heat. Many of the survivors were already impoverished and disenfranchised and Katrina had further devastated them. The processing often took many hours as well, and by the time they came to us for medical care they were exhausted. However, not once were they loud or angry, instead they were all serene and thankful and deeply appreciative of us.

On our busiest day in the mobile unit we saw 71 patients. The City eventually sent over another mobile unit that we used to give folks immunizations (300 to 400 patients a day). We saw colds, hypertension, diabetes, chest pain, injuries, rashes, STDs, anxiety, depression, heat exhaustion, and even erectile dysfunction. Three babies were also born at the St. Agnes center.

We were moved by the stories of the patients, which often involved separation from family, loss of property and tangible memories, and fears of dying. Most had lost their homes, their possessions and their jobs. One man told me that his house was gone, washed away by the Mississippi river. Another saw corpses of babies and the elderly in the water and had made it out of New Orleans and was now wandering the streets of Houston staying at different churches. Others described the horrible stench in New Orleans. One survivor only spoke Vietnamese and had not yet found his wife and three kids. He was unable to communicate with the FEMA folks and we subsequently got him in touch with SOS Boat People and the Asian Community Clinic, which had Vietnamese translators to help him fill out his papers and to find his family.

The story I was most struck by was the one about the "Jacuzzi boat." A 23 year old mother told us that she spent four days on the roof of her house with her four children without any food. Over that time she watched the water rise and helicopters covering in the distance. She was sure that they would all die when a "Jacuzzi boat" appeared. I had never heard of a Jacuzzi boat hence inquired further. Apparently a man had flipped over a plastic swimming pool ("Jacuzzi") and was rowing using a stick. She feared for her children's life and she handed over her 4 kids to this man she had never met. He told her that he would send someone to rescue her. She was eventually rescued but one of her kids was sent to a facility in Colorado. Just recently she was reunited with all her children.

The stories of the Hurricane Katrina survivors are overwhelming and have forever touched my heart. I want to thank the organization for giving me this opportunity to be here and to thank all of you have covered my practice in my absence. I also have to thank my family for just letting me get on a plane to Houston and not telling them when I would be back.