

Headline News

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Professionals offer services, but everyone wants to help

By Daniel D'Ambrosio

How can I help?

That's the question being asked as news from the Gulf Coast states devastated by Hurricane Katrina becomes ever more grim.

For some -- professionals with skills to offer and the ability to leave jobs and family to help -- the answer has been to head south and offer aid. Dr. Mark Prete of Torrington is treating 200 patients a day in what used to be a hospital parking lot near the Mississippi coast. The makeshift ER set up when the hospital building was damaged and shut down after the hurricane.

Prete, an emergency room physician at Torrington's Charlotte Hungerford Hospital and a team leader [Chief Medical Officer] of Connecticut's Disaster Relief Medical Assistance Team, is expected to spend at least two weeks there. His five-member team also includes nurse Wendy Wheeler of Harwinton. Their team was joined by two others sent from other states.

"They are seeing everything from heat stroke to dehydration and heart attacks induced by the stress of life down there right now," said Michael Purcaro, Public Information Officer for Connecticut's Disaster Relief Assistance Team. "There is complete destruction and devastation all around them, which is at the heart of the worst hit area. They are in good spirits and safe. It is hot."

Power companies including Connecticut Light and Power are sending workers to rebuild the electrical system wiped out by Katrina. Saturday morning, some 15 Connecticut Light and Power crews will gather early in the morning at Southbury Plaza shopping center to begin a journey to Biloxi, Miss.

"Mississippi Power contacted us and said, 'We can use your help,'" said Mitch Gross, spokesman for Connecticut Light and Power.

Gross said the crews, who all volunteered for the mission, will be in Biloxi for two weeks, and then will be replaced by fresh crews for another two-week stint. If Connecticut Light and Power's help is needed beyond those four weeks, Gross said the company will provide it as long as it can spare the crews.

"We're proud of our mutual aid record," Gross said. "We've got crews that are very good at this type of work."

He said many of the 50 to 55 employees taking part in the relief effort had also helped in past disasters around the nation.

"We do know this will be a tough job," Gross said. "It's hard work. Dangerous work, too."

But helping Katrina's victims is not limited to those who can travel there. Community groups across the region are organizing fund-raisers and residents are responding to Gov. M. Jodi Rell's "call to action." Rell urged people to donate bottled water, easily opened non-perishable food and snacks,

batteries, blankets, tarps and tents to National Guard armories in Hartford, New Haven, New London, Norwalk, Putnam and Waterbury.

Rell also encouraged donations to charitable organizations such as the American Red Cross, Salvation Army and AmeriCares.

The governor also announced Thursday that college and university students from Connecticut studying in New Orleans, or other areas hit by the hurricane, would be welcomed at the four Connecticut State University campuses until their schools are able to take them back.

Students can contact the admissions office or president's office at any of the four CSU campuses -- Central, Eastern, Western or Southern -- for information about enrollment and admission. Rell has asked the CSU Board of Trustees to grant students affected by Katrina free tuition. They would pay only room and board.

In Waterbury, Maj. Chuck Strong said Thursday afternoon the armory had received more than 100 cases of bottled water -- with 24 bottles to the case -- in the first 4 1/2 hours after it opened at 8 a.m.

He said the armory also received quite a few sleeping bags and about a dozen tents, along with lots of cereal, soup and soda.

"It's overwhelming, very overwhelming," Strong said. "People are coming and asking, 'What else can we give?'"

Strong said the biggest problem the armory had was a shortage of boxes for the small individual donations being dropped off. "We need boxes to put these loose items in so we can put them on trucks," he said. "We can't take five cans of Pringles and throw them on the back of a truck."

Lt. Col. John Whitford, director of communications for the Connecticut National Guard, said the other five armories collecting donations across the state were seeing a response similar to the one in Waterbury, with Hartford residents lining up before 8 a.m. to make their donations.

Whitford said the governor had not designated a day when the armories would stop taking donations. The armories will be open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday each week.

Private organizations such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army are hardly sitting idle.

Chris Baker, director of emergency disaster services for the Salvation Army of Southern New England, which includes Connecticut and Rhode Island, said the organization has 24 people ready to help with efforts to feed the hurricane victims. He said he anticipated sending volunteers south as early as the end of next week.

"We do have 72 canteens currently providing food for emergency workers and victims," Baker said.

Those canteens are capable of serving 400,000 hot meals daily, though Baker said the Salvation Army is having a hard time finding warehouse space in the devastated coastal areas to put its supplies, "never mind donations." He said many buildings are still flooded, or are structurally unsound.

"It's quite a sight, it's unprecedented," Baker said. "We're trying to get our volunteers to understand what you're seeing on television, if you think that's unbelievable, wait until you get down there. It's a thousand times worse."

Some of the Salvation Army's crews had seen bodies float by their canteens, and snakes and alligators, given virtual free reign by the flooding, are a "huge issue," Baker said.

The Salvation Army held a training session for volunteers in Hartford Wednesday night, and there will be another session on Sept. 21, with additional training as needed every two to three weeks after that, according to Baker. He said the Federal Emergency Management Agency told the Salvation Army that relief efforts will likely go on for six to nine months.

Stephanie Carlson, program services coordinator for the Waterbury Chapter of the American Red Cross, said the best way for Connecticut residents to help is to send a check to their local Red Cross chapter, specifying that it's for the disaster relief fund.

Carlson said the organization would use the money to buy supplies, food, and water, and that it would also be used to help pay for the administrative tasks associated with mobilizing volunteers.

She said there were currently 62,000 people in Red Cross shelters across Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The Red Cross initially budgeted \$130 million for its relief efforts, according to Richard Stubbs, executive director of the Waterbury chapter.

"But that's going to go up," said Carlson. "That was to cover the immediate response. It keeps getting worse and worse each day."

Carlson said a training session for volunteers next week is already filled with 40 people. She said there are about 30 people on a waiting list for future training sessions.

"We've been inundated with phone calls from people wanting to help," Carlson said.

Brigitte Ruthman contributed to this report.

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