Blueprint for Creating a Social Work-Centered Disaster Relief Initiative
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To cite this Article  Bliss, Donna Leigh and Meehan, Julie(2008) 'Blueprint for Creating a Social Work-Centered Disaster Relief Initiative', Journal of Social Service Research, 34: 3, 73 — 85
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01488370802086401
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01488370802086401
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ABSTRACT. The damage to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast caused by Hurricane Katrina and the resulting need for comprehensive and sustained assistance to affected communities and families revealed limitations in conventional disaster responses. A blueprint for creating a disaster relief initiative was developed by a school of social work and a local human service organization. This, then, became the impetus for creating a three-stage, family-focused, extended disaster relief initiative. Using ecological theory and service-learning as frameworks, the initiative helped address the needs of families who moved to Athens, Georgia in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The responsive, adaptable, and sustainable nature of this model in addressing both immediate and long-term needs of the families is presented. Process evaluation and data on the helpfulness of the model by stakeholders who participated in the project are also provided. Implications are directed to social workers, educators, helping professionals, and policymakers who respond to such disasters. doi:10.1080/01488370802086401

KEYWORDS. Model for disaster relief, community-university collaboration, social work

Dramatic television images of people being rescued from flooded New Orleans in late summer 2005 brought a national outpouring of immediate support for thousands of stranded persons, many of whom were eventually evacuated to temporary shelters across the country. After shelters began to close, even greater challenges unfolded as questions about where these people, many of whom lost everything they owned and had no more than the clothes on their backs, would go given this devastation. Unfortunately, conventional responses to disasters such as that of the American Red Cross (2006) are more immediate and short-term in nature as “disaster relief focuses on meeting people’s immediate emergency disaster-caused needs . . . to enable them to resume their normal daily activities independently” (¶ 3). As such, these approaches do not address questions about how to respond to the long-term needs of displaced families who might not ever be able to return to their homes, nor do they provide guidance on how host communities can re-
spond to the influx of large numbers of people who have nowhere else to go.

A pressing question, then, is how to respond to such a disaster. Unfortunately, the displacement of such a large group of people has no referent in contemporary American history with the possible exception of the Dust Bowl days of the Great Depression in the 1930s. However, the Dust Bowl occurred over the span of several years, while the magnitude of the impact of Hurricane Katrina was happening over a period of days and weeks.

Examining this question from a social work perspective could have promise as the profession has a long history of responding to the needs of vulnerable populations, including those who experience natural or man-made disasters. Yet, the disaster response literature has tended to focus more on the role played by other professional groups rather than social work (Newhill & Sites, 2000); although the authors note that social work involvement in debriefing work and other aspects of disaster response has begun to emerge in the literature.

The primary focal area of social work in disaster response efforts typically centers on the provision of clinical interventions (Galambos, 2005). For example, in a study of victims of chemical exposure in South Mississippi, Rehner, Kolbo, Trump, Smith, and Reid (2000) noted the role of social workers in helping to provide both immediate and long-term mental health services and support groups. In a case study of social work involvement with workers and volunteers who were assigned to a morgue following a major air disaster, Newhill and Sites (2000) identified how social workers could help support disaster response workers who handle dead bodies that result from disasters.

Social work involvement in disaster response efforts can also be organizational in nature. Zakour (1996a) emphasized the importance of the coordination of volunteers from social service organizations in responding to disaster situations, but also identified how social and geographic barriers can negatively impact the effectiveness of disaster relief efforts. Galambos (2005) noted that a four-step approach is needed that incorporates elements of research, administration, community organization, and clinical practice into more complete disaster relief efforts that go beyond just providing clinical interventions.

Less researched, though, is how social work organizations, such as schools of social work, that typically are not providers of social services, respond to large-scale disasters. In one study, Matthieu, Lewis, Ivanoff, and Conroy (2007) discussed how a school of social work acted as a “central hub of information, training, and resources in times of a national catastrophe” (p. 115) in their study on the response of a school of social work to the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001. However, this study primarily addressed how the school responded to assist students rather than how student and faculty resources could be mobilized in order to assist community organizations in responding to the disaster while at the same time continuing to function as a school of social work.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to illustrate how a southeastern school of social work, in the first few months after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, responded to a request by a community organization to assist in working with a large number of displaced families who migrated to Athens, Georgia. The blueprint used by the school and community organization to develop, implement, and evaluate a social work-centered disaster response initiative is presented followed by a description of the Hurricane Katrina Project, a three-stage disaster relief initiative that was the product of this blueprint.

DESTINATION: ATHENS, GEORGIA

During September 2005, Athens-Clarke County, located in northeast Georgia, initially became home to approximately 100 families (approximately 300 individuals) who were evacuees of Hurricane Katrina. By November 2005, this number had increased by another 75 families or so. They had found their way to Athens via different paths. Some relocated after their stay at the nearby Rock Eagle temporary shelter in Eatonton, Georgia. Others had families, and/or friends in the Athens area. Some had ties to the University of Georgia (located in Athens), while others “heard” that Athens was providing assistance to evacuees. Some fami-
lies had social supports and living skills, while others had little sense of how to integrate into a new community.

The large influx of families to the Athens area created an urgent need for case management services as Community Connection, an information and referral call center, did not have the mandate or staffing to adequately handle the demand, and volunteers were not adequately trained in case management skills. To help respond to the needs of the families, Community Connection requested that the University of Georgia School of Social Work (SSW) identify faculty and students willing to volunteer their time to serve as case managers.

**CREATING THE BLUEPRINT**

The immediate challenge involved in such an undertaking was how to develop a timely and adaptable response to the pressing needs of the families in light of the time and resource constraints of SSW students and faculty. The most serious concern was how students, many of whom volunteered on a short-term basis while families were at the temporary shelter at Rock Eagle, could volunteer over a sustained period of time given their busy schedules. Additionally, there was concern about how students could serve as case managers as there was no infrastructure to support them in this role. During initial discussions there was also uncertainty over what the displaced families needed and whether the organizations could help in addressing these needs. Despite the uncertainty of the situation, the decision was made to pursue developing some sort of response effort given the urgency of the situation.

These discussions led to the explication of a set of underlying assumptions that were believed to be critical, not only in shaping the disaster response initiative, but in ultimately serving as the underpinning for the entire initiative and in evaluating its effectiveness. Among these assumptions were: (1) respond rather than react, (2) initiative should be client-driven, (3) help families help themselves, (4) focus on what could be done rather than what could not be done, (5) start where each family is at, and work from there, (6) utilize an ongoing and simple process evaluation framework, and (7) do not underestimate the importance of making a supportive, human connection.

From these underlying assumptions two orienting questions emerged that began the process of developing a collaborative relief initiative: (1) what are the needs of the families and (2) what are the capacities and resources of Community Connection and the SSW that could be used to respond to these needs. These questions served to both drive the initiative and to trigger the evaluation emphasis throughout the life of the project.

While both organizations were able to identify resources and capacities that could theoretically be used as the basis for a collaborative effort, less clear was how they could and should be used, and if it were possible to do this in a sustained manner. The two orienting questions led to a series of more detailed process questions (shown in Figure 1) that helped translate theory into practice by serving as a starting point for

**FIGURE 1. Initial Process Questions**

1. What are the actual and immediate needs of the families?
2. How do the families prioritize these needs?
3. What resources are currently available in the community to address these needs?
4. How can the capacities/resources of the collaborating organizations best be used to assist families in getting their immediate needs met?
5. Given the unknown nature of the situation, what is the best way to begin to approach it?
6. Should the relief initiative be structured using phases or stages?
7. How can personnel resources be used in a sustained manner?
8. How can student volunteer labor be used to work with families without diminishing student learning needs?
9. How can the logistics of an academic setting be used to assist the relief initiative?
10. Are there any resource constraints that might impact the nature of the relief initiative?
11. What should the primary focus of the relief initiative be?
12. What is the nature of the relationship between responders and families?
13. What are the short and long-term goals of the collaboration?
14. What are the conditions whereby the collaboration ends?
15. How can an evaluative component be added to the relief initiative without hindering the ability to respond to the needs of families?
identifying an ongoing conceptual, operational, and evaluation framework that could be used to create a feasible disaster relief initiative.

One predominant theme that emerged from an exploration of these process questions was the need to utilize a social work-based perspective that focused on developing creative ways to begin to understand and respond to the many needs of families who were now staying in Athens. This included the need for flexibility in being able to modify the relief initiative, given the fluid nature of the situation, and sustainability of the relief initiative over an extended period of time. This initial approach was grounded in social work’s history of providing disaster relief via helping to provide support to vulnerable populations, working to prevent more serious, long-term negative psychosocial problems that could result in the aftermath of the disaster, and helping to improve access to needed resources and services (Zakour, 1996b).

In addition, Sollman and Rogge (2002) emphasized the need for addressing ethical considerations in such relief initiatives. These considerations were operationalized to include: (1) not providing false hope to families that major needs such as for housing, jobs, transportation, financial assistance would be met, (2) maintaining appropriate boundaries given that graduate social work students were not operating within a professional capacity of providing social services, (3) providing faculty support for students, and (4) emphasizing helping people help themselves rather than operate from a typically paternalistic perspective that could have the potential to foster dependency.

While these criteria initially appeared reasonable during the early phase of the project, a practical challenge involved developing a disaster relief initiative that was feasible and had the potential to address some of the immediate needs of the families. This was a daunting task given that the scope of the needs of the families such as the need for shelter, food, money, jobs, transportation, etc., was far beyond the capacity of either Community Connection or the SSW to provide. In addition, graduate social work students had serious time limitations given their course schedules, field practicum requirements, jobs, and family and personal responsibilities that would preclude them from engaging in long-term efforts.

These considerations led to subsequent discussions about how the relief initiative should be structured in order to maximize the benefit to families given the time constraint that student assistance might not be available once the school year ended. Three primary areas emerged that were believed to be central to determining the focus of the initiative—assessment, engagement, and resolution. These areas became the themes for three distinct stages that structured the relief initiative.

**FRAMEWORKS USED TO GUIDE DISASTER RELIEF INITIATIVE**

The process questions (see Figure 1) played a critical role in identifying the frameworks that could be used to help structure and guide the disaster relief initiative. The first framework was conceptual in nature and helped to guide how best to respond to the immediate psychosocial needs of families. The second was operational in nature and addressed the logistical considerations of the relief initiative. The third highlighted the need for providing a source of ongoing feedback to help guide the relief initiative.

**I. Conceptual Framework: Needs-Based Ecological Perspective**

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in terms of magnitude and scope is unprecedented in contemporary American history. The ensuing sluggish response by government provided uneven assistance, at best. Faith-based communities, community organizations, concerned families and individuals were among the parties that provided substantial assistance. The challenge for the SSW, given its academic resources, was how to address some of the unmet needs of the families by helping them to help themselves as they tried to build new lives in the Athens area.

An ecological framework was used to address the first point. This focused on the importance of understanding the roles of adaptability and reciprocity about how people transact with their environments with an ultimate goal of
maximizing the goodness-of-fit between individuals and their environments (Barker, 1999).

Attempting to maximize the goodness-of-fit of this approach required that the initiative focus on **what** resources could be provided rather than **what** could not. For example, many families would probably need assistance with housing, jobs, paying bills, and transportation. Yet, providing this kind of assistance would be beyond the ability of Community Connection and the SSW. However, within an ecological framework, understanding the unique needs of each family, providing information on services available within the community, and offering a human connection based on compassion, hope, and capacity-building would become the overriding conceptual themes that drove the disaster relief initiative.

**II. Operational Framework: Rapid Response Service-Learning**

Another challenge was being able to begin the initiative in a timely manner given the urgency of the situation and sustain it over a meaningful period of time. Given the previously mentioned time constraints of the students, those who wanted to volunteer needed to be supported, yet be able to fit this commitment in their busy schedules. This was particularly important as the start of the initiative was planned to begin as the fall semester was ending. Rather than delaying the initiative until the beginning of the next semester, there was a need to allow for a rapid response on the part of students so that families could be assisted as soon as possible. The key to accomplishing this involved the use of a service-learning framework (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). According to these authors, “service-learning is an educational methodology which combines community service with explicit academic learning objectives, preparation for community work, and deliberate reflection” (p. v). This allowed students to exchange the time they would have normally spent working on class assignments with working with a Hurricane Katrina family instead.

Structured time in class each week would be set aside for addressing concrete questions students might have, but also in exploring the human and social justice implications of the work. This was reiterated because most of the students were white (as is typical in many schools of social work), while most of the displaced families were African American. Green (2001) noted how race can be an uncomfortable aspect of service-learning as “we often gloss over the difficulties that students have performing service in places where they are uncomfortable, where poverty is not pretty or idealized” (p. 18). Finally, consistent with the need for deliberate reflection as an important aspect of service-learning (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001), students would also be assigned to write a reflection paper at the end of the semester to help facilitate meeting their learning needs by integrating their service work with the displaced families with course learning objectives.

**III. Ongoing Process Evaluation Framework**

The two orienting questions that were the impetus for the development of the set of initial process questions identified in Figure 1 also played an important role in the life of the disaster relief initiative. The two questions—(1) what are the needs of the families and (2) what are the capacities and resources of Community Connection and the SSW that could be used to respond to these needs—also served as the starting point for an ongoing and simple evaluation framework by helping to trigger additional stage-specific process questions that provided real-time feedback and identified any need for modifications in the initiative. This proved to be a critical component in the disaster relief initiative as presumptions about how the families were coping and what they might need could prove to be inaccurate, especially as time unfolded. Given the uncertain nature of the situation and lack of available models for responding to a disaster the scope and magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, a responsive, client-centered focus was needed to allow for adaptability and flexibility in the relief initiative over the course of time.
APPLICATION OF THE BLUEPRINT IN CREATING THE HURRICANE KATRINA PROJECT: A THREE-STAGE, FAMILY-FOCUSED, EXTENDED DISASTER RELIEF INITIATIVE

An integration of the conceptual and operational frameworks along with ongoing process evaluative questions resulted in the development of the Hurricane Katrina Project (HKP)—a three-stage, family-focused, extended disaster relief initiative. Figure 2 presents the schematic blueprint or model that was used to help create the HKP.

What follows is an overview of the primary theme of each stage of the HKP and the specific work that was done by the students. In addition, the use of the orienting questions to trigger stage-specific process questions as a source of ongoing feedback and modifications to the relief initiative is noted.

Stage 1: Assessment

The theme of this stage was “assessment.” The primary goal was for students to conduct comprehensive needs assessments on families who indicated they still wished to receive social services and provide information to the families on services that were available in the Athens community. Yet, unlike needs assessments that utilize dichotomous “yes-no” question formats, this assessment utilized a social work-focused, person-centered approach as it asked each family not only to indicate whether they had a need or not in various psychosocial domains, but also to prioritize the degree of their need from no need at all to dire need.

In early November, Community Connection, the Red Cross, and Athens-Clarke County held a disaster resource fair to provide families with information on available resources. Families were also asked if they wished to receive case management services. During December 2005, 22 students from a class on macro social work practice volunteered to call the contact person for 59 families that stated they wished to receive case management services. Of these 59 families, 12 could not be reached by telephone, nine had disconnected phones, and three indicated they no longer needed case management services. The students then met with the remaining 35 families who responded in the affirmative to conduct needs assessments. Basic demographic information that might have had an impact on the ability of the families to receive assistance was collected. For example, the mean number of persons living in the home was 3.26 (range = 1 to 7). The mean number of years lived in New Orleans was 33.00 (range = 3 to 65). Families had been in Athens anywhere from 1-4 months. At the time, many families reported that they weren’t sure how long they would remain in Athens, whether they planned to stay for an extended period of time, or whether they planned to stay in Athens permanently. From the onset, then, students were acclimated to a needs-based model to assist in timely decision-making.

Assessments identified the perceived need families had in 29 areas including housing, transportation, medicine, and social support. Families were asked to rate the degree of need/concern they had for each area from 0 = no need/concern to 5 = dire need/concern. The top five areas that families were most concerned with were financial stability, getting their FEMA reimbursements, seeing a dentist, being able to pay their rent, and finding a job. After assessments were completed, families were given a comprehensive list of social services.
and other resources they could attempt to access, if they needed to.

In addition, given that the needs assessments were conducted over the holiday season, families who were assessed during the first two weeks in December were also asked if they needed assistance with holiday gifts and/or food. Eighteen families indicated they needed gifts and 11 indicated they needed food. The holiday assessments for those who responded in the affirmative were given to Community Connection in order to help these families access holiday support that was available in the community.

The two orienting questions that were used to identify the initial focus of the relief initiative also triggered a series of Stage 1-specific process questions that helped to refine the focus of Stage 2. These questions are shown in the text box below.

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**Stage 1 Process Questions**

1. How can the resiliency that many families exhibit be used to help them cope in rebuilding their lives?
2. Given limitations in many concrete resources that families reported being a pressing concern to them, how can families be assisted in adapting to their new environment if these needs cannot be addressed?
3. Can providing a human connection and source of social support by students aid families in coping with the aftermath of the disaster?

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These process questions highlighted the need for a change in how students interacted with families that necessitated the need for proactively supporting families as they attempted to engage the community in accessing resources. While it was apparent that the relief initiative could not provide many of the concrete needs of the families, feedback from families during Stage 1 indicated that “having someone who cared” was greatly valued. Thus, the need for actively engaging families in an attempt to provide a supportive, inclusive environment for them to operate in, needed to be particularly emphasized in Stage 2.

**Stage 2: Engagement**

The theme of Stage 2 was “engagement.” The primary goal of this stage, then, was to “help families help themselves” by supporting them in building new lives in the Athens community, if they so chose. This involved students “adopting” a family for the spring 2006 semester and providing social support, encouragement, problem-solving strategies, and information about resources. Students in both a cultural diversity class and a health and social work practice elective class were given the choice of doing a traditional assignment or working directly with a Hurricane Katrina family. In addition, a few students in other courses volunteered to participate. The 20 students who decided to participate in the project were informed that they would be making a commitment to contact their family every week or two to see how they were doing, and to provide any assistance they could. Students were also told they would be required to write a reflection paper on their experiences. This commitment would end in early May, when the spring semester ended.

Each of the 35 families who received a needs assessment was contacted by a student to see if they were still interested in receiving additional assistance over the next few months. Twenty-five families said they wished to receive assistance, four families said they were doing fine and no longer needed help, one family said they were moving back to New Orleans, and five families could not be reached by telephone any longer.

Most of the work students performed centered around providing social support and information on accessing resources in the community. Students also organized a clothing and household item drive. The key feature of this drive was that it involved collecting items that met specific needs identified by the families. While this was a more time-consuming approach compared to organizing a mass clothing and household items drive, the decision to utilize this approach was primarily a function of feedback from families who talked about how demeaning it felt to them to have to scavenge through piles of clothes that were collected at temporary shelters in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
The ongoing evaluation feedback triggered by the two orienting questions led to a series of Stage 2-specific process questions that helped shape Stage 3. These not only highlighted the strides families had made in rebuilding their lives, but also identified the potentially debilitating nature of trying to rebuild their lives in an environment that had limited resources. These questions are shown in the text box below.

**Stage 2 Process Questions**

1. Are there ways to help replace the structures of informal social support that families relied on prior to Hurricane Katrina?
2. What should the response be if families are not ready to end their relationship with students?
3. How can families cope with feeling torn about returning to New Orleans?

These process questions provided feedback about the need to accept the limitations of the relief initiative, but also to believe in the resiliency and capacity of families to survive.

**Stage 3: Resolution**

The theme of this stage was “resolution” and was marked by the need to begin to “let go” of the families as they solidified their connections to their new community. While the hope was that families would be more able to engage the community in getting their needs met by this time, it was unknown how they would be doing several months down the road.

Given that making a human connection and providing social support was a main focus of the project, students were given the responsibility to give families a “heads up” in mid-April that the project would soon be ending. Feedback from students highlighted the emotional nature of saying good-bye, both from their perspective and their family’s.

Despite marking the “official” end of the HKP, the two orienting questions triggered a set of Stage 3-specific process questions that had implications for potential future follow-up. The questions are shown in the text box below.

**Stage 3 Process Questions**

1. How can families adjust to the uncertainties of the provision of resources in the future as they continue to try to rebuild their lives?
2. What impact will the coming first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina have on the short- and long-term mental health of families?
3. What will the long-term psychosocial needs of families be?

### EVALUATION

Two evaluation components, which underpinned each stage, were built into the HKP. The first assessed the conceptual framework that guided how students attempted to assist families in adapting to their new environments. The second assessed the operational framework that was used to allow students the opportunity to participate in the project over a period of time while still being able to have their learning needs met.

**Process Evaluation of the Conceptual Framework**

During the summer of 2006 one of the researchers attempted to contact the families who participated in the project. Unfortunately, only eight of the 25 families were able to be contacted. In many cases, phone numbers were disconnected, calls went unanswered, or messages were not returned. A few were reached, but indicated they had moved out of the Athens area. Attrition was expected as many families had begun to express a desire to return to New Orleans at some point in the future, so the researchers, who had hoped to obtain evaluative feedback from most of the families who participated in the HKP, felt that some evaluative feedback was better than none at all.

A qualitative approach was used to evaluate the HKP by having one of the researchers ask families four open-ended questions that assessed what was most and least helpful about the disaster response initiative and how future disaster response initiatives could be more...
helpful. The interviewee was the contact person who was listed on a contact form (usually the wife or mother) from Community Connection. Interviews were held at the interviewee’s place of residence except in one instance where the interview was conducted at a public library. Simple content analysis was used to identify themes that emerged [in bold]. Selected salient quotes from families are included.

1. How helpful was the extended disaster response model in meeting your most pressing needs or concerns?

All respondents indicated the extended disaster relief model was helpful to them in terms of feeling cared about/supported, receiving needed tangible goods, and learning about services in the area.

“There’s just the idea that someone is there and cares when you feel torn apart.”

2. What specific aspects of the extended disaster response model were most helpful?

All of the respondents indicated that the most helpful aspects of the response model were having someone to talk to and feeling cared about.

“Calling and caring uplifted me, especially when I was depressed.”

3. What specific aspects of the extended disaster response model were least helpful?

While three families expressed concern about the adequacy about information and resources they received from students, most families felt everything the students did was helpful.

“They needed more information about services, not just about the Red Cross.”

“There’s nothing, I appreciated everything they did for me.”

4. How could future extended disaster response models be developed to be more responsive to the needs of affected families?

Almost all the families expressed the need for providing more basic services and more complete information on available resources. Some of the families also emphasized the importance of providing social support.

“Just be there to provide a shoulder to lean on or someone to talk to.”

In addition to the open-ended questions, each family was asked to complete a post-needs assessment that examined their perceived need/concern in the same 29 areas identified in the initial needs assessment. The top five areas of need/concern were rent, financial stability, trauma concern, utilities, and employment/job.

Process Evaluation of the Operational Framework

The 20 students who worked with families during the course of the project were given the following six open-ended questions, which were derived from concrete suggestions made by Eyler (2002) for enhancing reflection, to guide them in writing their reflection papers at the end of the project. Simple content analysis was used to identify themes that emerged [in bold]. Selected salient quotes from students are included.

1. What were your assumptions and expectations about the social problem/issue and people involved before you began your service-learning project?

Students expressed feelings of personal inadequacy and wondered whether what they had to offer would be well-received. Concern that families might not trust the students was mentioned by some. There was an expectation that the needs of families were not being met by various organizations, but a couple of students did assume the disaster response initiative would be sufficient to help families get back on their feet.
“I was worried about what they would think of a 23-year old white female calling them to ask if I could help them.”

2. In what ways were these assumptions and expectancies confirmed and disconfirmed during your service-learning project?

The primary theme of this question was one of resiliency. Students reported that their families, while still struggling to rebuild their lives, were generally positive and resourceful. Students also found that their initial sense of inadequacy was unfounded as they were able to be of assistance to their families.

“The families actually seemed to have positive attitudes, and didn’t want hand-outs or special treatment.”

3. How do you interpret these confirmations and disconfirmations in the context of what you are learning in this and other classes?

Students tended to attribute their negative assumptions that families would have great difficulty coping to stereotypes they had about impoverished, African American communities. One of the major sources for these stereotypes was the inaccurate portrayal of families in the media. Some students were also able to identify how their white, middle class backgrounds helped them to assume they would have been able to function more effectively if the disaster happened to them. Most of the students mentioned that course content they learned in a cultural diversity class helped them to identify the sources of these negative assumptions.

“These people are not ungrateful and lazy poor people. They are not all criminals, feeling angry and bitter about their situation.”

Students also emphasized that they were able to incorporate positive perspectives of their families from their course work.

“I have learned through a number of courses that when individuals are faced with the most difficult situations, often-times this is the period from which a person can grow and recognize his or her strengths.”

4. How has your understanding of the social problem/issue and people involved changed over the course of your service-learning project?

One of the primary shifts in understanding involved being exposed to undertones of racism and poverty in this country. Accompanying this was a deeper understanding of the harmfulness of stereotypes, especially those portrayed in the media.

“When the hurricane blew through New Orleans, it blew the lid off of a hidden culture of poverty.”

Students also commented on how Hurricane Katrina exposed the inadequacy of conventional disaster response models and the need to develop more diverse models.

“Help fell through on every level.”

Perhaps one of the more important areas of understanding had to do with witnessing the resiliency of people even in times of tragedy.

“It never ceases to amaze me how resilient people can be during a crisis.”

5. What are the social justice implications of what you have experienced and learned during your service-learning project?

Students examined two broad areas of social justice implications. First, many students discussed how the disaster uncovered issues of poverty and racism in the United States in a way that could not be minimized or denied. Second and closely related to the first area, was the inadequate governmental response to the needs of families and negative media portray-
als that served to cast families as being unworthy of assistance.

“Since disasters of this magnitude are very rare in this country, it became blazingly clear that we did not have a plan in place to help the victims appropriately and thoroughly.”

“I think that the Hurricane Katrina Project has been instrumental in changing the belief that the families are lazy and want a hand-out.”

6. How will you use the insights and experiences gained during the course of your service-learning project in your future personal development? in your future development as a social worker? in future community involvement?

Perhaps the greatest area for future development that students identified was the need for becoming aware of and then overcoming personal biases and prejudices about others.

“I learned that I should never make judgments or assume things about people that I have never had contact with.”

Students were also able to learn from their experiences in ways that can benefit their professional development as social workers. One of the major areas students discussed was the need to be more in tune with both the short-term and long-term needs of persons who are experiencing difficulty.

“I think it is valuable for social workers to keep in mind that most clients do wish to be able to provide for themselves and to meet their own needs, and only ask for help when in extreme circumstances.”

Students also recognized the importance of community involvement and support in the lives of individuals and families and how social workers can assist with this.

“As a social worker, it is necessary to be ready to adapt and even get rid of ideas that have not worked. Watching the Katrina Project go through this process will make it easier for me to get involved with the community in my career.”

LESSONS LEARNED

During initial discussions on how best to respond to the needs of families, representatives from Community Connection and the SSW talked about the uncertainty over the situation, whether the disaster response initiative would be able to help any of the families, and what would happen to the families after the HKP ended once the academic year was over. A predominant theme in these discussions was the sense of “not knowing what we were getting ourselves into” given that the SSW and Community Connection were going to try to operate almost as if they were quasi-social service agencies in working with families over a sustained period of time. There was also a sense of “flying blind” in that the scope of Hurricane Katrina called for creating novel ways to respond to the needs of the affected. At the same time, the urgency of the situation demanded a timely response. This would necessitate beginning the response initiative the first week of December, just as the fall semester was ending, rather than waiting until the spring semester started in January. While the quick turnaround time was challenging to achieve, delaying the response, while less chaotic for the SSW, did not seem prudent given the urgency of the need for assisting the families as soon as possible.

Governmental responses to Hurricane Katrina have been soundly criticized as slow, unresponsive, or insufficient. Some have similarly criticized larger bureaucratic organizations such as the American Red Cross that are charged with responding to disasters. Yet, in the face of a large-scale disaster such as this, these are the primary sources of help that people look to. The challenge, then, is how to creatively use other sources of assistance such as community organizations, faith-based communities, and universities in innovative and adaptable ways to help respond to the needs of others.

The HKP is an example of how this kind of community-university collaboration can occur
during a time of great need. This three-stage, family-focused, extended disaster relief initiative, with its emphasis on “helping people help themselves” and providing a sustained source of social support, is illustrative of how the collaborative blueprint developed by the SSW and Community Connection can be used to help create future extended disaster responses. Although the scope of the HKP was limited in terms of number of families assisted, type of assistance provided, and its duration, the model was feasible and helpful. The ongoing process evaluation and feedback from families showed the model to be very helpful as they went about trying to rebuild their lives. Students also reported that participating in the project enhanced their classroom learning, overall. For some, it was a learning environment where theory and practice integrated almost simultaneously in this effort.

Yet, the positive impact of the HKP should also be viewed in light of limitations in the disaster response initiative. First, the scope of the HKP was small in comparison to the number of families affected by Hurricane Katrina who migrated to Athens, Georgia. While the number of families who participated in the HKP might be representative of the thousands of families that were impacted, care should be given in generalizing the findings to all of these affected families as there may be important differences in terms of important socio-demographic variables between families who migrated to Athens and those who went to other parts of the country. For example, despite the stereotype presented in the media, not all of the families affected by Hurricane Katrina were poor. Some had more resources than others that greatly affected their ability to cope with the disaster. Second, while 35 families participated in the initial phase of the HKP, only eight families could be located to participate in the evaluation of the project once it was completed. While the evaluative feedback about the helpfulness of the HKP was informative, the small sample size calls for caution in generalizing the feedback they gave in terms of making recommendations for handling future disasters. Third, students who participated in the HKP were constrained by their responsibilities as students from providing more comprehensive case management services. While feedback indicated that families found the work of the students to be helpful, the degree of help offered was “a drop in the bucket” in comparison to what families reported they needed. Fourth, the blueprint used to create the HKP, while potentially informative to other schools of social work and community organizations, could possibly be idiosyncratic to the particular organizations that developed it and the community in which it operated. As such, the blueprint should be utilized as a guide for developing a disaster response initiative rather than a prescription.

Despite these limitations, the greatest lesson learned from the HKP was that despite the impact of a large-scale disaster, and the seemingly overwhelming needs that must be addressed to help families, neighborhoods, and communities to ultimately recover, a social work-centered perspective that utilizes a community-university collaboration can be a viable resource. A focus on “starting where the person is” and “helping people help themselves” by fostering an environment of social support and community engagement, is not only consistent with a social work perspective, but also reported to be helpful by families who participated in the HKP.

However, a key consideration in the success of such an endeavor is the degree of administrative support the initiative receives during all phases of the project. The substantive support the HKP received from the dean, associate dean, and faculty of the SSW created an environment that supported and sustained the HKP. Without this support, the ability to mobilize and utilize student resources over a sustained period of time would be virtually impossible to accomplish.

Fortunately, with most disasters that occur, conventional disaster response models such as typified by the Red Cross are usually adequate in responding to the needs of the affected persons. While disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are rare, the scope and magnitude of these disasters can easily overwhelm conventional disaster response efforts and call upon community-based responses to help fill in the gaps. The blueprint for a disaster relief initiative that was used in creating the Hurricane Katrina Project can be used by other schools of social work and community organizations in developing their own disaster relief initiatives regardless of the type of disaster, whether man-made or natural.
REFERENCES


RECEIVED: 12/27/06
REVISED: 08/01/07
ACCEPTED: 08/13/07