

MONDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2005

National Report

The New York Times

A Grass-Roots Group Is Helping Hurricane Survivors Help Themselves

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

HOUSTON, Oct. 30 — With Hurricane Rita bearing down on this city of refuge packed with survivors of Hurricane Katrina, a tense drama played out last month at the Reliant Arena, where hundreds of families from New Orleans, concentrated from the Astrodome and other shelters, were once again facing emergency evacuation.

Relief officials were lining them up for trips to yet other shelters as far afield as Fort Chaffee, Ark., when the officials ran into a storm of their own: a demand that vacant houses and apartments in secure inland areas be made available instead.

The agitation worked. Housing priority lists were hurriedly revised. Buses and taxis carried many families from the arena to their new homes around town.

And the Metropolitan Organization counted another victory. "As long as they're American citizens, they're not going to be forced to go to Arkansas," said Renee Wizig-Barrios, the group's lead organizer, who played a central role in the standoff.

In the two months since Hurricane Katrina hit, the Metropolitan Organization, a group of professional organizers affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a grass-roots network founded by the Chicago radical Saul D. Alinsky, has been busy sowing nonpartisan political activism and mobilizing survivors to champion their own interests in resettlement and rebuilding decisions.

Early on, with at least a quarter-million people finding refuge in the Houston area alone, it helped organize evacuees in the Astrodome, winning a playground for children and secure areas for the elderly. It persuaded the Federal Communications Commission to maintain evacuees' cellphone service even if they fell behind in their bills.

It held a seat on the emergency planning council convened by Houston and Harris County officials to cope with the disaster. And despite the challenges of organizing evacuees dispersed around the country, it is trying to collect 50,000 signatures on a petition setting forth reconstruction goals to influence the New Orleans election for mayor early next year.

"T.M.O. has been a great source of grass-roots wisdom on a variety of issues," said Mayor Bill White of Houston, who invited Mrs. Wizig-Barrios to attend the daily strategy sessions on disaster planning. "It was natural to look to them to be part of overall community efforts."

Mayor White said "there was only one particular time we weren't on the same page": the confrontation at Reliant Arena. But "it was an isolated case," he said, and "we don't mind a level of accountability."

The Metropolitan Organization, active for 25 years in Houston, has toned down the confrontational play-

book applied by Mr. Alinsky and his followers in the Depression-ravaged 1930's and the revolutionary 1960's. Today, organizers seek alliances with partners like religious groups, schools and unions, while identifying and grooming local leadership.

"The iron rule in organizing is, 'Don't do for people what they can do for themselves,'" Broderick Bagert, one of the group's organizers, said at a meeting at a church last month that brought survivors of Hurricane

Katrina face to face with public officials.

One woman from New Orleans, Sandra Nelson, was blunt. "Y'all just received \$40 billion," Ms. Nelson said to a chorus of approving hoots from the audience that quickly turned to laughter. "My question is, 'Where's that money?'"

Others wanted to know why evacuees were being offered housing, often in decrepit areas, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. "I don't want my son

to fight and duck bullets," said Deborah Brown, who wore a cap with a T.M.O. button. "I want a choice where I live."

Helping to lead the gathering was one of the first evacuees chosen for leadership, Linda Jeffers, a former New Orleans businesswoman who ran a company called Leg Work, which guided citizens through the governmental bureaucracy.

Plucked from the roof of her flooded house by neighbors in a purloined boat, Ms. Jeffers had landed in the Astrodome when the Metropolitan Organization called for volunteers. She ended up as a rallying presence for her fellow survivors. "We got some opportunities here — I don't want to say problems," she told the officials at the church.

Stoked by anger over bungled relief efforts, similar organizing efforts are under way in Louisiana and other states where evacuees are concentrated.

"This gives us an opportunity to show what we can do," Ernesto Cortes Jr., the southwest regional director for the Industrial Areas Foundation, said at a strategy session several weeks ago in Los Angeles. "We want to shape the political dialogue."

Sister Christine Stephens, a Ro-

man Catholic nun with the Congregation of the Sisters of Divine Providence of San Antonio, and the foundation's lead organizer for Louisiana and Texas, said: "Katrina has ripped the mask off of major cities so that people can understand the need for health care, the need for education. Katrina has opened up a conversation that, before, many people were not willing to have."