

## **Congressional Testimony to Congress**

### **Mike Huseh, CEO Lutheran Episcopal Services in Mississippi**

Established in 1991 and re-constituted in January 2005, Lutheran Episcopal Services in Mississippi (LESM) grew out of a unique partnership between the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi, the Southeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the Congregations of the Southern District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Since its inception, LESM continues to be on the cutting edge of unifying faith-based service ministry organizations, volunteer organizations, and other community-based non-profit organizations to pool resources and assemble consortiums that sustain long term recovery projects in Mississippi in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi, LESM is a faith-based 501c-3 organization that serves to bring dignity, healing, justice, hope and encouragement to all. LESM seeks to fulfill its mission by providing a wide range of programs and services for at-risk persons in Mississippi. The organization conducts and manages programs in: disaster preparedness and response; first responder relief; long term recovery; children's education; and restorative justice. LESM's current focus is to aid those affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Since August 2005, LESM has continued to be wholly involved in the relief and recovery efforts on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Among the first disaster response teams deployed, LESM established within days relief camps on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and an evacuee resettlement effort in Jackson, Mississippi. Today, LESM manages three case management and construction operations on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, as well as one serving central Mississippi. Offices and volunteer housing operations cover all of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and central/south Mississippi through locations in Ocean Springs, Long Beach, Bay St. Louis, and Jackson, MS.

With local, national and international support and more than \$10 million in cash, LESM has assisted thousands of survivors with both emergency and self-sufficiency needs. The driving force behind our work has been, and remains, the dedicated efforts of more than 50,000 volunteers who collectively have donated more than 2.9 million hours of service, valued at over \$58 million. For the first several months after Hurricane Katrina, the work focused primarily on emergency relief efforts (distributing food, clothing and other necessary supplies). The work's focus gradually grew to address the critical need of housing, i.e. returning clients to safe and affordable housing. Primarily with volunteer labor, we have gutted, repaired, rebuilt and built more than 5000 homes over the past three years.

Additionally, we have acquired, renovated and/or or built facilities to house, feed and support volunteers. This includes the Swingster Building in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, which has been developed, with the cooperation of the Board of Supervisors of Jackson County and the City of Ocean Springs, into a relief camp site named *Camp Victor*. This 37,000 square foot site is used for volunteer housing, food distribution, case management, construction management and warehouse space. Our three affiliated camp sites are able to daily accommodate and manage a total of 470 volunteers.

Last year (2007) LESM leveraged \$1.4 million in the cost of volunteer housing and construction management to produce more than \$10.7 million in direct services to the residents of the lower

Mississippi counties. These results are quite typical of LESM's operating protocol as it is with other community and faith-based organizations operating in the Gulf Coast Region.

One can easily understand why recent polling showed that Gulf Coast residents overwhelmingly trust faith-based organizations over governmental organizations (74%) to continue the long term recovery projects that will ultimately result in their being made whole once again.

From the beginning, a pivotal aspect of LESM's disaster recovery efforts has been its Case Management Program wherein clients receive a "continuum of services" including, but not limited to, assistance with utility bills, rent, mortgages, healthcare, childcare, transportation, employment and housing. This "continuum of services" approach to case management is designed to be holistic, comprehensive and results oriented. The primary goal is to move clients from survival and dependency to self sufficiency and independence. Thus, the program works to: support client recovery efforts; address their short and long term needs; and, effectuate positive and sustainable changes. Over the last three years and through its Katrina Aid Today affiliation, LESM has served more than 2000 clients, many of these poor, elderly, and/or handicapped.

While LESM presently continues its case management operations statewide, it is increasingly difficult for us and all of our partners to sustain the programs necessary to provide sustainable long term housing solutions for those still remaining in temporary and unsafe situations.

The primary reason for this ongoing challenge is the low inventory of affordable housing due to the destruction caused by the storms. While case management is a necessary function to assist in bringing residents to the resources they need, case management alone cannot build and repair housing units.

Funding for direct services that will complete the housing circle has dried up. Case management operations continue to be funded, but are largely ineffective in resolving this issue without housing resources.

There are two crucial components that are needed to complete this process. The first is funding for the long term recovery committees (LTRC) so they can continue the process of providing building resources to the residents once the case manager has coordinated all of the pieces of the puzzle. The second is a continued source of funds for the LTRCs to allocate to organizations to rebuild the coast. The American Red Cross has run out of funds for the Gulf Coast and the Salvation Army is nearly depleted. Garnering private grants and donations continues but becomes increasing difficult as time passes and the process becomes more costly.

Continued long term recovery for the Gulf Coast residents through the case management model can only achieve a level of success equal to the level of funding provided to case management as well as the long term recovery committees.

LESM has been designated as the statewide disaster preparedness and response coordinator for National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) members Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) and Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD). With a fulltime Disaster Preparedness and Response Director, LESM is has developed a statewide comprehensive education and awareness program for disaster preparedness, response, and long term recovery. Relevant and up to date information is posted on the LESM website.

Under the leadership of Michael Huseth, CEO, and with the support of its affiliated denominations, Board of Directors, volunteers, contributors, partners and dedicated staff members, LESM has become a recognized leader in the Mississippi Gulf Coast disaster recovery efforts.