

Local Red Cross chapter takes on Gustav and Ike

By Patricia Harvey



Red Cross volunteer Kathy Sharkey helped provide food to Gulf Coast residents in the wake of hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

As Hurricane Gustav churned through the Gulf of Mexico on its way to the Louisiana coast, retired kindergarten teacher Kathy Sharkey was at home in Colorado Springs – prepared, if called, to embark on her first national deployment with the Red Cross.

On Friday, Aug. 29, Sharkey received that call in the form of an e-mail from Jaici Williams, director of Volunteer and Emergency Services for the Pikes Peak Chapter of the American Red Cross. Volunteers were needed on the Gulf Coast, the message said.

By Saturday, Sharkey had her marching orders, and by Sunday she was in San Antonio. “Knowing what we know from Katrina, there was a massive effort on the part of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and partner organizations to pre-stage, and have a plan in place,” said Williams. “The preparations resulted in massive assisted evacuations during Gustav.”

A veteran of the 2007 Holly, Colorado, tornado relief effort, Sharkey was one of 16 volunteers from the Pikes Peak Region, and 6,500 nationwide, to serve in all four Gulf States during the 2008 hurricane season.

Assigned to help run shelters, kitchens, or prepare food, Sharkey said, “I don’t know how many ‘God bless you’s I got, but it might have been enough to get me into Heaven.”

While the majority of coastal residents heeded urgent warnings to evacuate or face “certain death” in the face of Hurricane Ike – a storm the size of New England, according to weather experts – local authorities reported that thousands remained behind, either refusing evacuation orders or unable to get out in time.

Making landfall in the early hours of Saturday, September 13, Ike’s 110 mile-an-hour winds and deadly storm surge splintered homes on Galveston Island and the Bolivar Peninsula, carrying debris for miles. Further inland, winds of around 70 miles-per-hour blasted out skyscraper windows in downtown Houston and knocked out power to millions.

With so many unable to return to their homes or prepare meals because of power outages and unsafe drinking water, the Red Cross was ready with shelter, food and emotional support, Sharkey said.

To date, 29 deaths have been attributed to Ike in the Houston-Galveston area; 400 people are still reported missing.

“As the situation changed, (volunteers) drove to be where needed for Ike, tracking, and rerouting resources,” said Williams. Redeployed to Louisiana, Sharkey said her crew was still dealing with Gustav when Ike struck, spurning tornadoes on the “dirty” side of the storm.

“We were sent to Westwego (Louisiana), to work at Henry’s Kitchen, a mobile kitchen that travels from site to site and feeds up to 20,000 people a day. I was very happy to be assigned to that.”

At the national level, the Red Cross set up 27 mass care feeding kitchens in Texas and Louisiana and 270 shelters. According to Williams, volunteers take about 40 hours of classroom training to fully prepare for disasters of this magnitude. “Whether the disaster is a single family event or on a large scale, it’s devastating,” she said.

At the same time the Red Cross is helping people get a handle on their needs and available resources, they are providing basic emergency food, clothing, shelter, prescriptions, glasses, and temporary lodging – where Williams said FEMA stepped in this time.

The Red Cross also looks at the scope of the disaster for damage assessment.

“For those who lost everything you are there to do the mass care and continue to provide a safe place for every person that is a neutral environment,” said Williams.

Spending much of her time readying meals to be transported through neighborhoods in an emergency response vehicle known as an ERV, Sharkey said she never worked so hard in her life. The ERV driver uses a loud speaker to let people know they can come out and get food while a helper hands servings out the window.

Despite the long days, Sharkey said she had a good time getting to know her fellow volunteers and playing cards at night. The volunteers were treated to southern-style dinners hosted by a local church, and invited to attend services.

“Everybody who could possibly have a hand in this relief effort got together ahead of time,” Williams said.

Deployed nationally for a minimum of three weeks, all volunteers stay in the same type of shelter as clients and work 15- to 16- hour days.

“They’re not put up in the Hyatt Regency; they experience the same situation as their clients, so they really do feel for these people,” Williams said.

In the Pikes Peak region, the Red Cross operates in 18 counties with a paid staff of nine and roughly 300 to 500 volunteers. According to Williams, “We are here to prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies.”

To volunteer with the Pikes Peak Chapter of the American Red Cross, go www.pparc.org on the Web, and click on “give time,” or call 719-632-3563.

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