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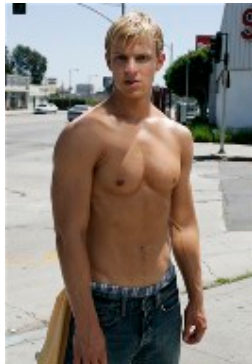
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Gay and Lesbian Community Responds to Katrina

by Julie A. Weisberg

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's path of destruction and grief, Americans everywhere have opened their checkbooks, cupboards and hearts to provide much-needed assistance to the shell-shocked and displaced survivors of last week's storm.

Many of those among the suffering and displaced who need help most are members of the Gulf Coast region's queer community.

To help, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition - a queer youth organization based in Washington -- has partnered with more than 19 queer or queer-friendly organizations to create the "Hurricane Katrina LGBT Relief Fund."

The fund was quickly put together to specifically target members of the queer community affected by Hurricane Katrina, offering support and resources to local organizers.



According to NYAC Executive Director Craig Bowman, left, the fund was created "to ensure that the most vulnerable members" of the queer community affected by the storm receive "the critical support they need to regain stability in their lives."

"These folks lives have been forever turned upside down," Bowman said during a phone interview Wednesday afternoon. "Entire families have lost everything, and people have been uprooted, losing their sense of balance and culture."

This weekend, NYAC staff members - including Bowman himself -- are expected to travel to Houston to assist local LGBT groups prepare for and assist the influx of refugees from Louisiana, many of whom are members of the queer community.

"I am trying to get to Houston to get a better sense of what is happening at these relief centers," Bowman said.

Of immediate concern, he said, are those living with HIV/AIDS in the dozens of shelters set up to temporarily house those displaced by Hurricane Katrina throughout the south and elsewhere.

One organization the The Hurricane Katrina LGBT Relief Fund Coalition has begun to work closely with in the Houston area is the Montrose Counseling Center. The center, along with coalition, has been serving LGBTQ patients temporarily housed at the Astrodome and elsewhere.



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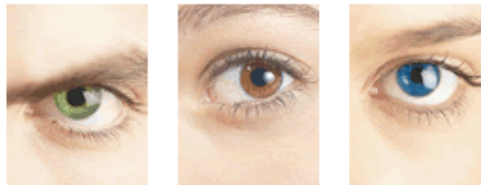
Together, the two groups "are making every effort" to provide medical and medication assistance to those living with HIV/AIDS who have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

"It is important to provide individuals displaced by Katrina access to health care services and medications they require," Katy Caldwell, executive director of the Montrose Clinic, stated in a press release posted on the group's Web site.

The clinic will also provide "free rapid HIV testing" to evacuees who do not have proof of HIV status so "they can get into care as quickly as possible," Eric Roland," Montrose Clinic's education director, stated in the release.

Q: Which eye color is most common?

- Green
- Brown
- Blue



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In addition, the Texas HIV Medication Program, the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) for the state of Texas, has developed a special program to provide emergency assistance to ADAP clients from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama displaced by Hurricane Katrina and seeking refuge in Texas.

"Because it is so critical to maintain continuity of care for persons living with HIV/AIDS on antiretroviral therapy, the THMP has taken the unprecedented step in expanding program access to non-Texas residents in their time of need," the Texas health department wrote in a recent press release on its Web site.

According to the release, "once approved," an evacuee will be able to obtain a 30-day supply of "their approved medications" at a "designated participating pharmacy."

"The emergency assistance will be available for eight weeks from their date of approval," the state wrote in the release. "A new client application will be required for continued assistance if needed at that time."

Approval, however, requires a small amount of paperwork, proof of identification and HIV status. And it is not just the quality of mental and physical health services for GLBTQ evacuees concerns many in the community, but also issues of access and sensitivity.

Jeff Cotter, right, executive director of the Rainbow World Fund, said Wednesday with so many faith-based organizations and church groups providing a bulk of Hurricane Katrina relief services, he is concerned some queers may "be afraid to reach out" for help due to "a lack of trust" leftover from a "history of discrimination."

"There are unique things that people in our community are faced with," he said, adding that some queer people may not have "as much family support" as other groups, making it more difficult to find alternative housing and that built-in support network that close families can provide in a time of need



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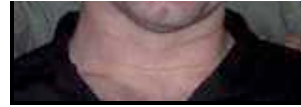
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To do its part, Rainbow World Fund -- a nonprofit queer humanitarian group based in San Francisco -- has also started a special fundraising project to benefit victims of Hurricane Katrina.



"We got flooded by emails and calls by people in the gay community who wanted to help, and so we decided to do something," Jeff Cotter, RWF's founder and executive director said of organization's hurricane fund.

Cotter said all proceeds raised through the fund drive will go to benefit America's Second Harvest, a national food bank network, to help feed the thousands of Gulf coast residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama who now find themselves homeless, broke and in need of medical assistance after the Aug. 29 hurricane.

And while Cotter said there is a "whole list of resources" that have been assembled for support and relief efforts for hurricane victims, "a lot of (GLBTQ) people are very hesitant" to go to these services.

"Transgendered people, in particular, have a difficult time getting quality health care," Cotter said. "And now they are faced with finding a new health care practitioner that is sensitive to their needs."

But Joe Conway of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief said Tuesday fears that some religious organizations would refuse relief assistance, or reduce the quality of that assistance, "are totally unfounded."

"We don't draw any lines," he said of his organization's relief efforts. "I don't know any relief workers who would deny any one" assistance due to their sexuality or gender, he said.

Deb Benson of Operation Blessing - a humanitarian nonprofit group affiliated with Pat Robertson's 700 Club - agreed.

"We do not discriminate," Ms. Benson said, adding that her organization has a non-discriminatory policy of helping others in need, including queer people.

Although Robertson has frequently condemned homosexuality in the past, and many Southern Baptist churches are supporters of "ex-gay" programs run by such groups as Focus on the Family, Benson said religious ideology does not come into play in administering disaster relief.

"Our mission is to deliver humanitarian aid ... and those services are non-discriminatory," she said.

Calls placed to a Salvation Army media representative were not returned.

And as the recovery and relief effort continues in the Gulf Coast region decimated by Hurricane Katrina, Cotter said the queer community will continue to do its part to help themselves and others.

"We have something to offer," he said.

JULIE A. WEISBERG is an award-winning reporter and freelance writer based in Stamford, CT. She is a regular contributor to publications in both the mainstream and alternative press. In addition to her freelance work, Ms. Weisberg has spent several years as a reporter in the newsrooms of three weekly newspapers in Connecticut. Julie may be visited on the web [here](#).

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