

Executive Director Jerry Friedman in Associated Press article on hurricane Katrina (September 7, 2005)

Evacuees Strain States' Social Programs

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WASHINGTON - Hurricane evacuees seeking food stamps in Texas started as a trickle and quickly turned into a torrent - eight applications the first day mushroomed to more than 26,000 within four days. To varying degrees, the same story is playing out around the country as state and local governments take in Gulf Coast refugees by the thousands, taxing social programs that in many cases already were stretched thin.

Minnesota, already working to absorb a wave of roughly 5,000 Hmong refugees from Laos, is preparing for up to 3,000 Katrina victims while still feeling budget cuts in health assistance and job training that have taken effect since 2001.

"We're not what we were five years ago," said Marcia Avner of the Minnesota Council of Non-Profits. "And the reality is, private charity cannot make up the difference."

In Oklahoma, Gov. Brad Henry spoke for many Tuesday when he talked of a desire to be helpful tempered by the concern that "we don't want to stretch ourselves too thin."

"We know it will be a strain," he said. "I think we will be OK."

In many places, concerns about cost were taking a back seat to the impulse to help, at least for now.

San Francisco was moving ahead with plans to house at least 300 Katrina evacuees despite warnings that the city could lose out on federal money by responding too quickly to a Red Cross request for help.

"We're taking these 300 whether we get reimbursed or not," said Annemarie Conroy, director of the city's Office of Emergency Services.

That thought was echoed across the country, in South Carolina, which prepared to take in as many as 18,000 refugees.

"The cost associated with this is kind of secondary at the oment," said Chris Drummond, a spokesman for Gov. Mark Sanford, adding that the state still remembers the help it got when hit by Hurricane Hugo in 1989. "We're going to return the favor."

Each state is coping in its own way. Arkansas' governor wants to tap the state's \$100 million budget surplus; Tennessee is dipping into its rainy-day fund, at least temporarily; Massachusetts was working on an emergency spending bill.

And states are counting on significant help from the federal government, which approved a \$10.5 billion down payment for hurricane relief last week. Congress is likely to approve far more in the days ahead, including assistance targeted for housing, health care, education and other needs.

Texas expects the Federal Emergency Management Agency "to reimburse us 100 percent for everything," said Robert Black, a spokesman for Gov. Rick Perry.

But the notion that Washington would pick up the tab for all hurricane-related costs seemed a bit rosy.

Ron Pollack, director of the health care advocacy group Families USA, said that before Katrina hit, Congress had been considering cutbacks in Medicaid "which will make a very bad situation a whole lot worse" if they come to pass.

Likewise, there are federal housing programs in place, but even before Katrina only a third of people eligible for assistance were being served, said Stacy Dean of the private Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. There are federal job-training programs, too, she said, but "the dollars are far too short to deal with the demand."

Federal Emergency Management Agency spokeswoman Mary Margaret Walker said Tuesday that by 4 p.m. EDT, 317,186 households had registered for state and federal disaster assistance. The agency is registering about 50,000 people per day.

School districts nationwide have begun enrolling students displaced by the hurricane, despite logistical and financial strains, hoping they will receive aid and leniency from state and federal education leaders. President Bush said the government is working on a plan under which the federal government can help the states pay for bills.

"I'm confident that this government of ours will be able to help the local school districts," Bush said.

Jerry Friedman, executive director of the American Public Human Services Association, said states are "acting with good intentions" while officials sort out who will ultimately pay the bills. For example, he said, other states have sent workers to Texas to help process food stamp applications, but it's not clear whether they are there simply as good neighbors or the federal government will pick up the tab.

"It's very much a work in progress," said Friedman.

The hurricane hit just as state budgets are starting to perk up after a protracted fiscal crunch.

A study released by the nation's governors this summer found that income, sales and corporate tax receipts beat expectations in 42 states during the budget year that ended in

June. But long-delayed spending needs and rising costs for education and Medicaid still are putting heavy pressure on state budgets.

Dean said the willingness to help so far has been fabulous, but she added, "The states' generosity is going to run out as their coffers empty" even if their desire to help continues.

"It will place an enormous strain on their social services," she said. "It's vital that governors speak up and ask for the federal financial support they'll need."

Charities, too, are being asked to help take up the slack.

In Georgia, which has 5,000 evacuees, Gov. Sonny Perdue is taping an appeal for help that will go to churches statewide. In Washington state, King County Executive Ron Sims spoke of the "enormous task" ahead.

"We're going to ask the public to work with us because that's going to be absolutely critical," he said. "Faith-based communities are going to be absolutely essential to provide housing and clothing and places for people to live."

Dean, cautioned, however, that while charities have an extraordinary ability to act quickly in an emergency, "their capacity and resources will be drained almost immediately. This is truly something that government has to deal with."