

How do you spell relief? COMMUNITY

Personal Comments of Asst. Dean Lydia Lazar, Chicago-Kent College of Law

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When disaster strikes, those who are affected do whatever they can to survive. Those who are not immediately affected have a choice – they can involve themselves in some way with the relief effort or they can go on with their lives. Here in the US, right now, a disaster has struck the communities around New Orleans, and as the nation responds with help of all sorts – from immediate search and rescue operations using both private and official boats, to organized bus caravans to take refugees from the compromised New Orleans Superdome to the Houston Astrodome, to the provision of emergency supplies – we see how critically interdependent we truly are, and, paradoxically, how fortunate.

We are fortunate that we can surround our distressed and struggling compatriots with both emergency and long term care, because we are truly rich – rich in resources, rich in spirit, and rich in technological capacity. Despite extraordinary and indefensible imbalances in the distribution of our wealth, the fact remains that as a national society we have ready access to money, supplies, vehicles, temporary dwellings and other emergency requirements.

As of today it appears that the relief effort is not well organized, and the horrific and deplorable scenes unfolding in the Mississippi Delta may generate longstanding resentment and mistrust of our authorities. But in spite of the apparently poor execution of the relief effort to date, we can have faith that the refugees will be ultimately cared for and they will eventually recover from this devastating catastrophe because they live in America, where there are intact communities and abundant resources to help them.

How different our story is from that of the millions who face such calamitous situations regularly. While bodies may not float in the streets of even the world's worst shantytowns, the daily devastation and the toll of global poverty around the world is appalling. Far too many poor communities struggle continually with a lack of sewage, potable water, and medical care, and their struggle is made all the more difficult by the fact that they are surrounded by neighbors who face the same daily crises.

As a community we Americans are generous and creative problem solvers. Many different sectors of our society are mobilizing to help the stricken citizens in Louisiana and Mississippi. For example, the law schools of the country have quickly come together to offer Tulane and Loyola of New Orleans students places for the fall term, and there are many other “affinity groups” reaching out and offering aid.

What we learn from disasters depends on many factors, including how severe the events are. It appears that there will be much to learn from Katrina, and much soul-searching to do to learn how our relief efforts can be better mobilized. Scientists tell us that extreme weather is to be expected as the earth experiences global warming, and our political

authorities tell us that it is inevitable that we will face additional terrorist attacks, so it is in our national interest to mobilize our best and brightest logistics experts, along with a slew of other capable folk, so that we are not unprepared going forward.

- Lydia Lazar.