Katrina's Latest Damage
Crime is up. Schools are overcrowded. Hospitals are jammed. Houston welcomed a flood of hurricane evacuees with open arms. But now the city is suffering from a case of 'compassion fatigue.'

By Arian Campo-Flores

March 13, 2006 issue - In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Houston earned a loving moniker among many of the evacuees who sought refuge there: the Big Heart. This, after all, was the city that housed, fed and mended more than 150,000 survivors in a herculean effort that won national acclaim. Houston officials mounted what is believed to be the biggest shelter operation in the country’s history, including MASH-like megaclinics that took on problems ranging from emergency care to eyeglass prescriptions.

Then, just as quickly, officials disbanded those facilities to usher evacuees into more-permanent housing, offering them generous vouchers that covered rent and utilities for a year.

"No other city really provided the resources and assistance Houston has," says Angelo Edwards, vice chair of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association. "If not for Mayor [Bill] White and his administration, a lot of us would’ve been lost."

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HURRICANE KATRINA

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But six months after the evacuees arrived, the city's heart seems to be hardening. The signs of a backlash are sometimes subtle. "You'll hear little snide remarks," says Edwards. "People will say, 'The reason you can't get a job is because you can't talk right.'" Other times, the reaction is more venomous. Among the nasty examples Dorothy Stukes, an evacuee, cites: graffiti blaring "F--- NEW ORLEANS" in her apartment complex, schoolkids taunting her grandchildren to "swim in that Katrina water and die," and shopkeepers muttering about survivors sucking the public coffers dry.

Stukes, chair of the ACORN KSA, has become so concerned that when New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin came to town recently, she begged him to hire a public-relations firm to repair the evacuees' image. But given all that Nagin has to contend with amid his own run for re-election, that is not likely to land high on his list.

Katrina continues to be a destructive force. The Bush administration found itself engulfed once again last week, after the release of some footage of the president at an August video briefing on the hurricane. The tape revived discussion of some of Bush's darkest days, when he seemed either uninformed or unable to respond to a national disaster unfolding on TV. But the tape wasn't the only thing fueling Katrina's return to the news. Stoked by congressional investigators, new details have emerged about the government failures that left so many people in mortal danger. Late last week retired Marine Corps Brigadier Gen. Matthew Broderick resigned his post as Homeland Security's operations chief amid accumulating evidence that the command post he directed as Katrina hit misjudged the early damage to New Orleans. (Homeland Security said Broderick left to "spend more time with his family.")

Yet as devastating as Katrina has been for the administration, its impact has been far more visceral in those communities that received tens of thousands of evacuees overnight. In cities stretching from Atlanta to San Antonio, good will has often given way to the crude reality of absorbing a traumatized and sometimes destitute population. In Baton Rouge, which added 100,000 people to a pre-Katrina population of 225,000, residents bemoan the loss of the city's small-town feel and worry that trailer-park settlements will become permanent fixtures of blight. In Dallas, the city housing authority began offering rent vouchers to some of its 20,000 evacuees, only to become quickly overwhelmed and fail to pay landlords, prompting a number of eviction notices.

But perhaps no city has been as convulsed as Houston, which took in the greatest number of survivors. As some see it, the city is suffering from "compassion fatigue." Public services are overwhelmed, city finances are strained and violent crime is on the rise. When city leaders in New Orleans made comments two weeks ago suggesting that they wanted only hardworking evacuees to return, some Houston city-council members erupted in protest—fearing that politicians in the Big Easy were trying to stick Houston with their undesirables. "We extended an open hand to all kinds of people," says Councilwoman Shelley Sekula-Gibbs. "If they want to return home, it's their right." And
if they want to stay, she adds, they "need to stand up, get on their feet and get jobs."

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