

# Hurricane Katrina:

## *Models for Effective Emergency Response in the Asian American Community*



A study by the Asian American Justice Center as part of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California and the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute's project on *Disaster Preparedness in Urban Communities: Lessons Learned from the Recent Catastrophes Relevant to Asian and Latino Communities in Southern California*. For more information contact Tuyet Duong, Staff Attorney, Asian American Justice Center, [tduong@advancingequality.org](mailto:tduong@advancingequality.org) or at 202-296-2300, x 124.



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# About Us



The **Asian American Justice Center (AAJC)** is a leading national voice to advance equality for all Americans. AAJC works to advance the human and civil rights of Asian Americans through balanced, non-partisan analysis, technical assistance, public education, public policy and litigation. Our goals are to:

**Promote Civic Engagement:** AAJC ensures that Asian Americans have the tools and institutional support they need to participate more fully in shaping the policies and programs that affect their communities on local, regional and national levels.

**Forge Strong and Safe Communities:** AAJC helps build Asian American community leadership, combats hate crimes and promotes productive race relations.

**Create an Inclusive Society:** AAJC assists Asian Americans in successfully challenging unnecessary barriers and restrictions to equal and fair access to justice and public programs.

The media, policy makers and other institutions have come to rely on AAJC's expertise on the Asian American community, and Asian American community leaders depend on AAJC's analysis and technical assistance.

AAJC holds leadership positions in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation's broadest civil rights coalition, as well as the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, a coalition of national Asian American and Pacific Islander advocacy groups. AAJC is a leader in other partnerships like the Rights Working Group, the New American Opportunity Campaign, the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, Americans for a Fair Chance and National Asian American Media Coalition.

AAJC works closely with its three regionally-based affiliates, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, the Asian Law Caucus and the Asian American Institute. In addition, AAJC has a growing network of nearly 100 community-based organizations.

Through the generous support of corporations, foundations, law firms and individuals, as well as the leadership of a voluntary Board of Directors, AAJC has established itself as an effective, national Asian American advocate for advancing equality for all Americans.



**ASIAN PACIFIC  
AMERICAN  
LEGAL CENTER**  
OF  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

The **Asian Pacific American Legal Center** was established in 1983 as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) and has become the largest organization in southern California that provides Asian and Pacific Islander and other communities with multi-lingual, culturally sensitive services and legal education.

APALC's in-house attorneys and paralegals have developed expertise in a variety of areas, such as immigration and naturalization, workers' rights, family law and domestic violence, immigrant welfare, voting rights and anti-discrimination, and have also worked towards building inter-ethnic relations.

Its language capacity includes: Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Malayalam, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese. Interpretation in other languages can also be arranged.

APALC's mission is to advocate for civil rights, provide legal services and education and build coalitions to positively influence and impact Asian Pacific Americans and to create a more equitable and harmonious society.

Founded in 1972, the mission of the **Asian Law Caucus** is to promote, advance and represent the legal and civil rights of the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Recognizing that social, economic, political and racial inequalities continue to exist in the United States, the Asian Law Caucus is committed to the pursuit of equality and justice for all sectors of our society with a specific focus directed toward addressing the needs of low-income Asian and Pacific Islanders.

**Asian Law Caucus**

Since the vast majority of Asians and Pacific Islanders in America are immigrants and refugees, the Caucus strives to create informed and educated communities empowered to assert their rights and to participate actively in American society. This perspective is reflected in our broad strategy which integrates the provision of legal services, educational programs, community organizing initiatives and advocacy.



The **Asian American Institute** was established in 1992 as a pan-Asian not-for-profit organization. The mission is to empower the Asian American community through advocacy, utilizing research, education and coalition building.

Specifically, the Institute works to improve cooperation and mutual understanding by bringing ethnic Asian American communities together, raising the visibility of the Asian American community and spotlighting its concerns so that elected officials, policy makers and the general public will understand, gather and disseminate data about Asian American communities.

# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

Hurricane Katrina's catastrophic impact not only shook the nation, but shook national ethnic communities and community based organizations in the area with its impact on marginalized populations. The disaster created increased attention on disaster preparedness in ethnic communities, both in the government and the NGO sectors.

With support from the Ford Foundation, Asian American Justice Center (AAJC) was asked by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) and Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) to draft a case study of the response in the Asian American community at the national and local levels to Hurricane Katrina. This case study would be a launching point by which interviews, focus groups, and a literature review would be conducted in order to culminate in a comprehensive report on preparedness in ethnic communities titled "*Disaster Preparedness in Urban Communities: Lessons Learned from the Recent Catastrophes Relevant to Asian and Latino Communities in Southern California.*"

Core lessons of this epic disaster included modeling community-based approaches and knowing when to effectively utilize local resources. Creative collaborations at the community level were vital to streamlining and expediting service delivery and disaster relief. National organizations had to cut some red tape and surrender some time and resources to assist those on the ground at the local level.

**LESSON 1: *Emergency preparedness should involve building community and intra-governmental and intra-faith networks, which are the most effective mechanisms to leverage diverse resources.*** In all disaster-affected areas in the South, most communities leveraged existing or new coalitions in order to distribute supplies, disseminate information, and form advocacy networks for individuals affected by disaster. For LEP evacuees, this was valuable as language resources could be more effectively utilized.

**LESSON 2: *Sources of immediate and intermediate financial assistance (SBA and FEMA), including government instrumentalities such as the American Red Cross, must completely restructure their systems so that they are culturally and linguistically appropriate.*** The mounting problems of evacuees one year after Katrina were primarily due to the disorganized state of emergency aid perpetuated by SBA and FEMA. FEMA notices were often vague and obscure to non-English speakers. In addition, the American Red Cross failed to plan and provide for LEP populations in their sheltering and immediate assistance efforts. Government agencies and government-funded agencies have a strong responsibility to plan for LEP populations when implementing immediate financial assistance systems. The most optimal planning would include an in-house language assistance plan that would outline how culturally and linguistically appropriate services and programs would be imbedded in current programs.

**LESSON 3: *Local governments and state governments have a responsibility to maintain strong partnerships with ethnic community-based organizations and include language as a target capacity in planning for emergencies.*** National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) documents and the National Response Plan (NRP) did not provide for building language capacity

within an emergency response. Building relationships with ethnic community-based organizations with capacity to provide language support is a way in which governments can utilize outside language resources in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Hiring bilingual and bicultural emergency personnel would be the optimal way in which cities and states could incorporate LEP populations into their planning.

**LESSON 4: *CDBG emergency block funding and other model affordable housing solutions must take into account LEP populations in planning and structuring programs.*** Most advocates will say that housing was the most difficult and intractable problem post Hurricane Katrina. In New Orleans, all the housing projects were destroyed or marked for demolition, which left no affordable housing options left for evacuees. Many evacuees to this day are living in trailer parks throughout the city. Many of these parks are crime-ridden and some are public safety hazards. Affordable housing solutions which can also be convertible in emergency situations should be city emergency planners' top priority in high-density population areas such as Houston, Texas and Los Angeles, California. These solutions must also include language assistance plans.

**LESSON 5: *Government and community-based agencies must invest in strong and tailored community education programs for LEP populations about insurance, bankruptcy, homeownership, asset-building, and creditworthiness.*** Southeast Asians and other immigrant communities, which often work in cash economies, suffered the most during this disaster. The combination of missing documents and lack of credit history served to prevent many from qualifying for SBA loans in order to rebuild their businesses and homes.

**LESSON 6: *Emergency Disaster Corps, Community CERT Corps, and faith based disaster corps should outreach to LEP populations in their recruitment processes.*** By far, the majority of emergency personnel and volunteers providing services in the South were Caucasian. Communities should encourage more bilingual and bicultural individuals to be trained in disaster and crisis-management during catastrophic emergencies.

**LESSON 7: *Community based organizations and associations serving Asian Americans must become part of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD).*** The goal of NVOAD was to bring national voluntary organizations active in disaster relief together to foster more effective services. This is accomplished through cooperation, coordination, communication, education, mitigation, convening mechanisms, and outreach. Because ethnic community-based networks were so vital to the response after Katrina, it is essential that such agencies become part of an organized national network in order to lend their cultural and linguistic resources to the national base.

**LESSON 8: *Both direct services and advocacy should be part of planning for emergency and disaster officials, organizations, and LEP populations.*** Many of the successes in the Gulf Coast for Asian Americans, including the advocacy for a trailer park and the campaign against landfills, were accomplished through community organizing and advocacy. For catastrophic emergencies, all entities involved in the immediate response should expect that when marginalized and LEP populations are involved, collaborative advocacy and education at the legislative levels should be designed and coordinated throughout leadership in the response networks.

# Hurricane Katrina: *Models for Effective Emergency Response in the Asian American Community*

## **I. Introduction: Asian Americans Left Behind**

Years after Hurricane Katrina, the Asian American community continues to struggle with the rebuilding and recovery process. The mistakes of government emergency entities and mainstream relief agencies have protracted and compounded the difficulties of a long term recovery for minority, disabled, and Limited English (LEP) Proficient populations. Specifically, Hurricane Katrina exposed the unique vulnerabilities of Asian Americans, who constitute one of the largest LEP populations on the Gulf Coast.

In September of 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated massive tracts of the Gulf Coast with tremendous force, leaving extensive physical, emotional, and community destruction in its wake. This disaster was historically unique from others that had come before it. Mainstream America fumbled. The nation's largest and most well-resourced government and private relief agencies, including the American Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other longstanding regional and local agencies were completely unprepared to meet the needs of LEP populations. Completely ignored by emergency authorities, tens of thousands of Asian Americans were forced to seek initial relief in their own ethnic communities. There was a lack of culturally and linguistically competent government and relief agency workers or even a plan to address different ethnic populations in the case of an emergency or disaster. Large gaps in services and advocacy for Asian American communities were due to limited media attention, unbalanced resource allotment, and mistakes by governmental agencies in disaster preparedness and response.

However, the disaster did yield innovative working models for providing community-based disaster response and relief for Asian American LEP populations. Three cities with significant Asian American populations will be profiled for these models: New Orleans, Louisiana; Biloxi, Mississippi; and Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Generally, there were massive failures in government systems that prevented Asian Americans from accessing much needed services and benefits. However, incremental progress for community welfare in health, housing, and disaster services has been made through creative and unique models of collaboration in the Gulf Coast community.

## **II. Cultural and Demographic Snapshot of Asian Americans in the Gulf Coast**

A review of the 2000 Census and other Louisiana-based population counts demonstrates that Asian Americans constituted a significant percentage of the impacted ethnic populations in the Gulf Coast.<sup>1</sup> According to the United States Census 2000, over 32,000 Asian Americans resided in the Hurricane Katrina impacted parishes in Louisiana. 37,910 Asian Americans in Louisiana

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I, Demographic Snapshot of Asian Americans in the Gulf Coast: Hurricanes Rita and Katrina-Affected Areas

spoke another language besides English.<sup>2</sup> 11, 859 spoke English “less than very well.” In addition, over 6,500 Asian Americans were living in the Mississippi impacted counties prior to the hurricane. Mississippi was home to over 18,000 Asian Americans, 2,204 of whom spoke another language besides English. 1,062 spoke English “less than very well.”

The largest Asian community affected by Hurricane Katrina was the Vietnamese American population; over 45% of Asian Americans in Louisiana are Vietnamese American<sup>3</sup>. Many of the Vietnamese Americans, as well as the Laotians, Thai, and Cambodians in the region, were limited English proficient and settled as refugees in the region after surviving war and political turmoil in their native countries. Because of the large shrimping and fishing industry extant in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, hundreds of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian shrimpers and fishermen settled in this rich seafood mining area, namely in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana; Bayou La Batre, Alabama; and Biloxi, Mississippi.

New Orleans was home to the oldest Filipino community in the nation. South Asians also constituted a significant population in Louisiana, with many working in the hotel industry. Other groups in the region included Chinese and Korean Americans, some of whom were also involved in the fisheries industry.

### **ASIAN AMERICANS IMPACTED BY HURRICANE KATRINA**

Estimated Total Number of Asian Americans in Hurricane Katrina Impacted Tri-State Area:  
**45,663<sup>4</sup>**

#### **LOUISIANA**

*Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area and Surrounding Parishes*

<b>Impacted Parishes</b>	<b>Census 2000</b>	<b>ACS 2005</b>	<b>2006 LPHI Survey (Post Katrina Estimate)<sup>5</sup></b>
<b>Jefferson</b>	16,111	15,333	15,270
<b>Plaquemines</b>	832	N/A	134
<b>St. Tammany</b>	1,969	2,659	1,374
<b>Orleans</b>	12,370	10,655	6,607
<b>St. Bernard</b>	1,241	N/A	0
<b>Estimated Total Asian Americans in Impact Area</b>	<b>32,523</b>	<b>Not Enough Data</b>	<b>23,385</b>

**37,910** Asian Americans in Louisiana speak another language besides English<sup>6</sup>  
**19,282** Asian Americans in Louisiana speak English less than “very well”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> All language data is drawn from the American Community Survey of 2005.

<sup>3</sup> US Census 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Total estimated population statistics are drawn from United States Census 2000. Note that also Census numbers also tend to under-report population numbers, especially ethnic minorities due to the language barriers.

<sup>5</sup> Louisiana Public Health Institute Survey, released January 2006

<sup>6</sup> All language data is drawn from the American Community Survey of 2005

## MISSISSIPPI

*Biloxi, Gulfport, D'Iberville*

<b>Impacted Counties</b>	<b>Census 2000</b>	<b>ACS 2005</b>
<b>Hancock County</b>	465	N/A
<b>Harrison County</b>	6,060	6,332
<b>Estimated Total Asian Americans in Impact Area</b>	<b>6,525</b>	<b>Not Enough Data</b>

**2204** Asian Americans in Mississippi speak another language besides English  
**1062** Asian Americans in Mississippi speak English less than “very well”

## ALABAMA

*Mobile County*

<b>Impacted County</b>	<b>Census 2000</b>	<b>ACS 2005</b>
<b>Mobile County</b>	6,215	7,255
<b>Estimated Total Asian Americans in Impact Area</b>	<b>6,215</b>	<b>7,255</b>

**22,681** Asian Americans in Alabama speak a language other than English  
**11,859** Asian Americans in Alabama speak English less than “very well”

*Defining Community and Cultural Characteristics of Gulf Coast Asian American Communities*  
Prior to Hurricane Katrina, not many outsiders or those from the Gulf Coast region understood some of the specific cultural traits of the Asian American population. The reality in the region was that local government entities and mainstream agencies had limited direct contact with these communities prior to Hurricane Katrina. Robert Olin Butler’s collection of short stories highlighting the East and West New Orleans Vietnamese American populations provided a critically acclaimed literary snapshot of these insulated communities<sup>8</sup>; Community support networks in the South greatly differed from the Asian American social services and advocacy networks in California and in the Northeast. At the time that Hurricane Katrina hit, the Asian

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<sup>7</sup> Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals, according to the government’s current definition, “have a limited ability to speak, read, write or understand the English language.” This has been traditionally measured as the ability to speak English less than very well. The Director of the Census determines limited English proficiency based upon information included on the long form of the decennial census. The long form asks respondents whether they speak a language other than English at home, and those that do are asked to evaluate their own English proficiency by choosing one of the four answers provided to the question of how well they speak English – “very well,” “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.”

The Census Bureau has determined that most respondents over-estimate their English proficiency and therefore, those who answer other than “very well” are deemed LEP.

<sup>8</sup> Olin, Butler Robert, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, 1993. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

American community infrastructure in the Gulf Coast was largely a loose network of faith-based institutions that served as the nucleus for cultural activities, educational activities, outreach, and emergency relief to individuals. The Vietnamese American communities, for example, generally relied on at least two separate faith based institutions for support: typically one Buddhist institution, and one Catholic.

In New Orleans, Asian communities relied upon faith-based leaders and organizations for information dissemination, community support, and social services. Bo De Temple, La Vang Church, and Mary Queen of Vietnam Church were a few notable churches which served as the nucleus of several close-knit Vietnamese networks in New Orleans. These faith based organizations had little to no infrastructure for receiving government or foundation funding for consistent direct services to the community. The networks were often tenuously connected to mainstream social services agencies such as the Hispanic Apostolate (affiliated with Catholic Charities).

In Biloxi, Mississippi, Asian Communities, mainly Vietnamese Americans, also relied upon their relative Catholic and Buddhist faith based institutions for support and information. Chua Van Duc Buddhist Temple was the main center of support for many Vietnamese Americans in Biloxi and the surrounding areas. Literally next door to this temple resided the Catholic Church of the Vietnamese Martyrs. While both congregations and constituencies remained mostly separate in ideology and activities, they were the locus of community information and support in Biloxi both prior and during the hurricane. Alabama had a similar faith-based structure, with both a Catholic Church and Buddhist temple one mile from each other in the small town of Bayou La Batre.

Most Vietnamese living and working in the Gulf Coast operated in a unique economic environment. Vietnam did not have an effective tax-collecting system. Prior to arriving in the United States, most Vietnamese Americans were not accustomed to paying taxes to a government entity. When Vietnamese Americans settled in the Gulf Coast and were integrated into the fishing industry, they operated on a cash foundation and did not have credit scores or banking accounts, and many had not been paying their income taxes. They were completely isolated from the United States mainstream economy. Many were completely linguistically isolated, especially older and elderly members who had spent most of their lives at sea shrimping and fishing, and had limited opportunities to learn English. It was due to these characteristics that many Vietnamese Americans were not able to qualify for disaster loans and grants, and were generally underserved in the entire disaster relief effort.

### **III. New Orleans: Evacuation as a Way of Life**

Because the city of New Orleans was underwater for a large amount of time in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Asian American community response was limited to the immediate evacuation and rescue efforts that ensued. Some of these advocacy efforts that resulted as residents began returning a month later were documented.

The Asian American community in New Orleans was diverse and spread out, and consisted of a small Korean American community, one of the oldest Filipino communities in the nation, a Chinese American community, a significant South Asian segment, and a Southeast Asian community, with Vietnamese Americans constituting the largest ethnic minority. Many Asian Americans resided in the more established areas of New Orleans, including the northern and

Metairie areas where there was moderate wind and flood damage. However, the Vietnamese American populations in Plaquemines Parish (West New Orleans) and in East New Orleans were heavily impacted by the hurricane as families were displaced and many lost their fishing boats and livelihoods.

Several community leaders describe the evacuation after the hurricane as a routine matter in the community. Many community members had previously evacuated during Hurricane Dennis and Hurricane Ivan. Most families in the Vietnamese American community evacuated via their own vehicles prior to Hurricane Katrina and were not on the buses coming from New Orleans. Therefore, they were not routed or assigned to the large shelters such as the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas.

Coordinating the evacuation of the remaining community members involved radio and television announcements, church bulletins, and simple phone chains that were used to check up on fellow neighbors, friends, and families. There were stories of shrimpers and fishermen who were trapped on boats, since they chose to ride out the storms in their boats, as they had done many times before in previous hurricanes. Community leaders reported that a few elderly chose to stay behind and had to be helicopter-evacuated.

In the heart of East New Orleans, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church became the hub for relief, disseminating emergency relief supplies, blankets, and food. Because of the scarcity of FEMA trailers and housing available for East New Orleans residents, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church and the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA) jointly conducted a campaign to advocate for a trailer park in that specific area. Their intensive efforts resulted in FEMA setting up a trailer park in front of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church. NAVASA was able to assist over 75 families in resettling in trailer homes.

#### **IV. Houston: A Community-Based Disaster Response for Asian American Katrina Evacuees**

##### *The Role of Faith Based Institutions*

New Orleans officials realized that a whole city would have to be evacuated, and thus, the largest metropolitan area that was geographically closest was designated as a mass evacuation point: Houston, Texas. An estimated 15,000 Asian Americans of the estimated 45,263 individuals who had made their home in the Hurricane Katrina affected areas initially evacuated to Houston<sup>9</sup>. Others evacuated to locations across the country. In a story that was generally unreported by the mainstream press, thousands of Vietnamese Americans from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama flooded the hallways of the Hong Kong Supermarket<sup>10</sup> complex in the southeast part of Houston during the evacuation, and circumvented the shelter set up for evacuees in downtown. The Hong Kong supermarket housed one of the largest Vietnamese markets in Houston, and it became an ad hoc relief station for Hurricane Rita and Katrina evacuees. From this complex, temples and churches bused the evacuees to their shelters and provided clothing, food, and

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<sup>9</sup> Some buses took hundreds of evacuees to other Texas cities, including Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. Other evacuee families also flew to California, Georgia, Virginia, and other states that agreed to support evacuee families.

<sup>10</sup> The Hong Kong Supermarket is a unique cultural institution for many Asian Americans and Vietnamese Americans in the South. The Hong Kong chain in the South has expanded to several cities, including Houston, Texas and New Orleans, Louisiana. In Houston, Texas, it is known as a cultural hub for Vietnamese Americans in that area.

donations. These faith based institutions included Chua Vietnam (Buddhist temple), Martyrs Catholic Church, Dong Da Minh (a convent), a Vietnamese Baptist church in the Southeast area, and a Catholic church in the Northwest area. Thus, Vietnamese Americans sought relief from faith based institutions with which they were previously affiliated.

#### *The Role of Ethnic Social Service Agencies*

Social services agencies tended to focus on their own population groups. The social service and community infrastructure for Asian Americans in Houston prior to Hurricane Katrina had more resources than its counterparts in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama. However, this infrastructure could not completely support all the emerging needs of Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, and Vietnamese Americans. The Chinese Community Center provided educational and full service support services to the Chinese community, served as a point of contact and support center to Chinese American evacuees, and provided FEMA registration assistance and housing assistance.

During the Katrina crisis, a handful of South Asians also took shelter and sought assistance from the Pakistani Apartment Owners Association, which provided many apartments as a temporary housing solution at absolutely no cost. This association provided substantial support to the City of Houston Housing Task Force, as it sought culturally appropriate interim housing solutions in the Southeast area for many Asian Americans and South Asians.

Vietnamese Community and Vicinity of Houston (VNCH) raised over \$500,000 in funds from the community to distribute to evacuees. The Vietnamese community was also served by four other nonprofits, including Research and Development Institute (RDI), VN Teamwork, BPSOS, and the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association (VCSA). BPSOS, located on the second floor of Hong Kong Supermarket, became the ad hoc relief center for many Vietnamese, with VN Teamwork and VCSA playing supporting roles. In addition, a neighboring refugee resettlement organization, the Multicultural Alliance, also provided relief services to hundreds of Vietnamese.

BPSOS, a national seventeen-branch Vietnamese social services agency, became a case management grantee of the United Methodist Church Katrina Aid Case Management Consortium, a group of eleven nonprofits dedicated to long term case management for Katrina evacuees. The Consortium had received funding from FEMA in order to conduct long term case management. The decision to grant BPSOS funds for this endeavor was an effort to promote culturally and linguistically appropriate services. However, other agencies voiced concerns that language capacities should also be emphasized as a target capability for all of the other agencies in the consortium.

Legal services to low income Asian Americans were severely lacking in the Houston area, and BPSOS provided the only standing immigration services in the area to trafficking survivors and torture survivors from all ethnic communities through a federally funded program. In the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program (HVLP) deployed more than ten Asian American bilingual attorneys to BPSOS and the Multicultural Alliance offices, both of which saw the largest concentration of Asian American evacuees. Volunteer attorneys offered advice and counsel on several immediate issues including FEMA assistance, housing deeds, and insurance matters.

Houston was also home to the only Asian American behavioral health care clinic, Asian American Family Services, and the only Asian American community health center, HOPE Clinic, with linguistic and culturally competent capacity. In a partnership that could serve as a model for future relief and response, HOPE Clinic stationed itself inside the offices of BPSOS for two months to provide immediate primary care assistance to thousands of evacuees. For many Vietnamese American evacuees without health insurance, this was the very first time that they had received healthcare in decades. Hope Clinic's community health center, however, was already under resourced given the local need before Katrina hit. While recognized as a model program, HOPE Clinic had not been able to obtain certification as a federally qualified community health center, and therefore, could not obtain any federal funding to reimburse the immediate Katrina expenses and ultimately had to shut down their Katrina relief clinic.

The Asian American community in Houston also had a very strong ethnic communications structure. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, thousands of Vietnamese Americans driving from New Orleans to Houston reported listening to two radio stations (Saigon Houston and Little Saigon) headquartered in Houston for up-to-date information about the disaster, the state of New Orleans, missing persons information, and other information about shelter and assistance. In addition, local Vietnamese newspapers printed up-to-date information about disaster assistance and temporary housing options. Furthermore, the Vietnamese community kept each other updated with relief and response efforts with an ongoing blog on blogspot.com. Finally, the Asian Pacific American Heritage Association (APAHA), traditionally an organization that facilitates cultural activities, took the lead in online communications and becoming a clearinghouse by maintaining a bulletin board on their website updated with news, public service announcements, and relief efforts of all Asian American entities and agencies. APAHA also facilitated a busing service in partnership with the Houston Metro Authority that bused evacuees from the Hong Kong Supermarket complex to the new FEMA Disaster Recovery Center more than 30 miles away.

Another key component of the Houston Asian American response was a mass influx of volunteers from all over the nation. Information from local responders at BPSOS, the local Asian American Health Coalition (AAHC) and VNCH was disseminated through hundreds of Vietnamese student associations, Asian American medical student associations (namely Asian Pacific American Medical Students Association), other Vietnamese community associations in other states, and many more community-based associations. Through these vast informal email networks, Houston community-based organizations were able to recruit hundreds of bilingual Asian American volunteers across the nation.

#### *The Role of Mainstream Relief Agencies and Entities*

Emergency financial assistance was also disseminated by the American Red Cross<sup>11</sup>. In Houston, the Red Cross emergency cash distribution system resulted in complete chaos. A fight broke out between groups of African Americans and Asian Americans waiting in line for the Red Cross credit card, which subsequently caused many Asian Americans to flee to the Southeast area. Several days later, the Red Cross created a hotline where evacuees could register for the cash assistance. This hotline had absolutely no language assistance, and volunteers answering the hotline took over two hours to process each individual claim. Because of the lack of language

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<sup>11</sup> Both FEMA and the American Red Cross disseminated emergency cash assistance, both two separate streams of emergency relief to evacuees.

access, hundreds of Vietnamese American evacuees lined up in front of the BPSOS Houston office to access a single Vietnamese bilingual interpreter who could call the Red Cross hotline for them. When volunteers urged the local Red Cross to hire Vietnamese workers and volunteers, the administration said that their procedures would not allow them to hire volunteers who had not gone through their internal training processes, despite the nature of the emergency. This was devastating to relief workers who wanted to volunteer for the Red Cross.

The city government also played a role in larger distribution and policy issues. Rogene Gee Calvert, Mayor Bill White's Director of Volunteer Initiatives and a local leader in the Chinese American community, was able to coordinate the city shelter at the George R Brown convention center, where a handful of Asian Americans sought assistance.

Houston City Councilman Gordon Quan and City Council Member MJ Khan coordinated citywide coalitions of leaders and organizations involved in relief and response to Asian Americans. These coalitions met weekly after the disaster to coordinate information sharing, housing assistance, and food and supplies distribution. The efforts by Quan and others culminated in a temporary housing program that attempted to provide culturally appropriate housing for many Asian Americans. With the help of many community partners and apartment associations, the City of Houston Housing Task Force compiled a database of apartments and housing available in the Southwest Houston area where many Asian Americans were living in the aftermath of the disaster. Much of the housing was located in locations near the faith based institutions in which evacuees had originally sought shelter.

The Houston Asian American response demonstrated that initial relief and assistance was provided effectively at the community level through dozens of agencies and associations, and through the mobilization of hundreds of individuals. One year after Katrina, an estimated 1500 Vietnamese and other Asian American families still remained in or retained close connections to Houston, commuting back and forth from the impacted Gulf Coast to Texas in order to access community support extended by welcoming social service agencies with Asian bilingual and bicultural staff and volunteers.

## **V. Biloxi: Volunteer Based Models**

Biloxi's response demonstrated the ability of a city government to coordinate volunteers from national and local levels. Mayor AJ Holloway led the relief and response network that consisted of the local Emergency Operation Command (EOC), all the emergency agencies within the EOC, and the Biloxi City Council. One of the main city officials directly coordinating volunteers was City Council Member Bill Stallworth. Councilman Stallworth's office took a lead in coordinating volunteers who were arriving from around the nation, including those from Church World Services, Volunteers of America, the American Red Cross, and others. His office set up the first relief agency on the ground, the East Biloxi Coordinating Center, which was the only centralized coordinating authority for volunteers coming into the city. Councilman Stallworth was eventually hired as a paid staff member of the coordinating center, and managed a housing program funded by Oprah's Angel Network.

Within the Asian American community, which is mainly Vietnamese American, two faith based organizations, the Chua Van Duc Vietnamese Buddhist Temple and the Catholic Church of the Vietnamese Martyrs, coordinated relief efforts. Located in the center of East Biloxi next door to each other, they became shelters and food & supplies distribution centers. In addition, both partnered with BPSOS in order to accept and coordinate supplies that were arriving from organizations and faith based organizations across the country. The disaster efforts of Biloxi Mississippi led to one of the largest volunteer efforts the city had ever coordinated. These efforts also coordinated with the ongoing city efforts.

While coordination of immediate relief in Biloxi between faith based institutions, community based agencies, and the government sought to bridge gaps in relief to ethnic communities, one specific incident highlighted how emergencies and language barriers could compound an urgent situation. A few Vietnamese families and individuals had been allowed by a casino worker to enter a gift shop and take what necessities were needed; these individuals also recounted how they were also allowed to take shelter in the casino due to the intense flooding and the fact that they were waiting for their loved ones to pick them up. Many individuals also witnessed another casino employee who identified himself as a manager enter the gift shop and check in with the families. A couple of nights later, local law enforcement vehicles surrounded the casino and most of the families fled, except for three Vietnamese American evacuees who were apprehended. They were questioned, booked without an interpreter, and charged with looting – a felony in the state of Mississippi. Because of the dearth of court employees, they were kept in jail for months following the hurricane without a hearing. They emerged from jail confused and completely unable to understand their indictment and charges. The court also had had difficulty finding a trained and qualified court interpreter for the purposes of conducting a plea hearing. While the defendants maintained that they had been allowed into the casino by an employee and were innocent, all felt compelled to strike plea bargains due to their immigration statuses and the pressure of the case on their families. This incident demonstrated the scarcity of resources available to law enforcement, emergency officials, and the courts, highlighted by the destruction of a natural disaster.

One year after Hurricane Katrina, however, many Vietnamese Americans are being displaced from East Biloxi. Many lived in the floodplain where insurance rates were prohibitive. This prevented them from attaining Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to rebuild their homes. Many Vietnamese Americans have already resettled on the perimeter of Biloxi in D'Iberville or Ocean Springs. Others remained on their land in FEMA trailers, hoping that the many casinos rebuilding in the area would buy them out.

In the early phases of recovery after the relief process, the National Alliance for Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA) placed a fellow from their fellowship program in Biloxi. This fellow managed to incorporate the Vietnamese American community into the community planning processes as well as advocate for language assistance throughout the CDBG information and application process. Initial information sessions and flyers about homeownership grants were conducted and distributed solely in English, despite the thousands of Vietnamese Americans who qualified and could not understand English.

## **VI. Bayou La Batre Disaster Response: Reaching Asian Americans in Rural Areas**

While most of the Asian Americans affected by Hurricane Katrina resided in Biloxi and New Orleans, a small but significant group of Southeast Asians were affected in a small and little-known town called Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Like the other groups, this group was primarily employed in the fisheries industry. Many Vietnamese Americans owned fishing and crabbing boats, while many Laotians, Cambodians, and Thai Americans worked on the fishing docks and on the boats.

Southeast Asians tended to reside in well known clusters of small homes in the community, most near the Asian markets and churches in the center of town. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many homeowners were displaced, and many temporarily fled to Texas. Most returned within weeks of the disaster to flood-damaged homes which were old and termite-infested prior to the disaster.

In the weeks following the disaster, the City of Bayou La Batre and the Mayor's office took the lead in coordinating disaster efforts. Staff members of the Mayor's office were on the ground distributing and trucking supplies to and from outlying areas of the county. The leaders of this effort included the Mayor's liaison and his building inspector. The City also partnered with the Alabama Emergency Management Agency in order to effectively distribute supplies, aid, and relief to the affected areas. The City was distributing supplies to thousands of individuals, but the Asian American population was completely unaware of the effort. The Mayor's liaison and other individuals filled a small pickup truck with supplies and emergency food and drove out to the areas where many of the Southeast Asians had set up temporary shelter. This was most likely a result of several factors: the insulated nature of the Southeast Asian community, the lack of prior relationships with the City, and the language barriers which prevented them from understanding City announcements regarding distribution of supplies.

One group which also took the lead in coordinating relief and volunteers for the Asian American community was a well-established incubating agency called Volunteers of America (VOA). VOA was funded by Department of Health and Human Services to incubate approximately thirty faith based and community based organizations by providing capacity building services, technical assistance, and subgrants in order to build small organizations. VOA's model also included a network of thirty to fifty organizations that could immediately mobilize for the Katrina relief effort. Through this network, VOA was able to recruit 12,000 volunteers for supply distribution and for repair of homes in Bayou La Batre.

BPSOS, the national Vietnamese service agency that had coordinated relief efforts in Houston and Biloxi, also set up a temporary office Bayou La Batre in partnership with Lutheran Disaster Relief (LDR). Together, the two agencies provided emergency case management and supply distribution to hundreds of evacuees in the area, with some coordination and partnership with the local Catholic Church and the Buddhist temple.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, many Southeast Asian families still resided in FEMA trailers, or even worse, in their old homes or trailer homes where mold issues and public health hazards remained major problems. Many who owned or rented damaged homes moved to Mobile, Alabama, a larger metropolitan area half an hour away. Due to their lack of credit history, only a handful qualified for the Community Development Block Grant funding for rebuilding homes. In

addition, Bayou La Batre was one of five cities chosen by FEMA to pilot a modular home project. Two years after Hurricane Katrina, not one pilot home had been built. While City employees maintained that they had distributed notices in Vietnamese regarding applying for a pilot modular project and the CDBG programs, most residents claimed they had never heard of the city's housing programs unless it was through a nonprofit disaster agency. A large number of Southeast Asian families were still living in trailer homes on land that had been designated by the City as areas where homes could not be safely built, and thus would be condemned. However, in a large twist which demonstrated some of the unorthodox ways in which local governments in the South functioned, many families and City residents alleged that homes were being condemned in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner by the City.

## **VII. National Asian American Response to Hurricane Katrina**

Direct services for evacuees were implemented in phases within the Asian American community. In the first phase, housing and alternative housing solutions were identified as the most urgent need in the community. With the support of the Freddie Mac Foundation, three national Vietnamese American organizations – the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), BPSOS, and the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA) – deployed housing assistance case workers to the Gulf Coast region to actively place evacuees into housing. Through this housing assistance program, case workers were able to place hundreds of Asian American evacuees into temporary or permanent housing solutions.

The second phase of rebuilding and recovery involved more long term case management and advocacy. FEMA was initially appropriated \$65 million for long term case management. These monies were subsequently granted to the United Methodist Church (UMCOR). UMCOR created the Katrina Aid Today case management consortium and gave 11 nonprofit agencies sub grants in order to provide long term case management to evacuees. BPSOS received a sub grant to place 17 case managers in the Gulf Coast, and proceeded to open three new Gulf Coast branch offices in New Orleans, Biloxi, and Bayou La Batre, with Houston also having a group of case managers. BPSOS also provided case management in several other branch offices, including Orange County, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Falls Church, Virginia. Furthermore, BPSOS received an AmeriCorps Direct grant in order to have 32 AmeriCorps volunteers in 17 of its branch offices to assist with case management, outreach, and communications to Asian Americans.

NAVASA also provided assistance to Vietnamese Americans by deploying its Dan Than Fellowship Corps to the Gulf Coast. These fellows provided technical assistance, capacity building training, advocacy assistance, and community mobilization to the Vietnamese communities in which they were placed. The Dan Than Fellows became especially active in nuclear Vietnamese communities in New Orleans East and East Biloxi. In New Orleans East, fellows assisted the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church (the core faith based institution in the Vietnamese American community) by gathering resources to start an after school program for young Vietnamese latchkey children in desperate need of homework tutoring.

Legal services emerged as an unmet need in the Asian American community in New Orleans. To help empower communities in accessing basic information about services available and their rights in accessing public support, the Asian American Justice Center, with the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA), BPSOS, Inc., the Japanese American Citizens

League (JACL), and New Orleans Legal Assistance (NOLA) formed the first community education and legal clinic for the Asian American community, mobilizing bi-lingual and bi-cultural volunteer attorneys and law students from across the country with language capacity in at least four Asian languages. The legal clinic served over 100 clients, covering legal and information issues, including landlord and tenant law, immigration, banking, insurance, FEMA individual assistance, SBA loan application assistance, and primarily insurance issues. A second clinic was erected in September 2006 due to the need and demand from the local community. The two legal clinics laid the groundwork for facilitating and nurturing partnerships between national and local agencies in order to further meet the needs of Asian American evacuees and families trying to rebuild their lives.

#### *Policy and Advocacy Efforts in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*

Policy and advocacy efforts in the Gulf Coast were accomplished through several different means: working groups, town hall meetings, Congressional caucuses, legislative advocacy, educating federal agencies, and local advocacy initiatives. The issues in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita involved health, housing, immigration, relief and other safety net benefits, and recovery and rebuilding.

While Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst disasters in our nation's history, public officials and Congressional members still needed up-to-date information, personal stories, and understanding of the specific failures of the system before they could begin thinking of reform at any level. Congressional briefings were held with the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC); Senate-led briefings were also held on the subject of Katrina. A Tri Caucus (Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus, CAPAC) Katrina hearing were held in Houston. Each briefing focused on certain issues, including immediate relief and response, housing issues, and other regulatory gaps in the system.

Community Town Hall Meetings were coordinated specifically for the Asian American fishing families and residents of the greater New Orleans and Plaquemines Parish region. Particularly noteworthy was a Community Speak Out Session hosted by Congressman Mike Honda, Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Asian American Justice Center to inform and educate the community on how to use its political voice to advocate for the community's proper due process rights.

While the effectiveness of town hall meetings and Congressional caucus briefings have still yet to be determined, it was vital that public officials and Congressional members connect with members of the public and relief workers on the ground in order to see the way that governmental failures during the Katrina response have truly impacted the lives of Asian American evacuees.

#### *Educating Federal Disaster Agencies*

Organizations serving marginalized populations have to work with the agencies who are involved in emergency preparedness and disaster relief – whether governmental, nonprofit or private – to ensure that the Asian American and other marginalized communities are effectively served. Most agencies and large non governmental organizations (NGOs) were completely unaware of the huge segments of LEP Asian Americans affected by the disaster.

In the aftermath of the disaster, FEMA, SBA, HUD, and other federal agencies failed to provide translated forms, information, and interpreters. The American Red Cross failed to address even

Spanish language needs, much less the language needs of Asian American immigrants such as the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Korean and Chinese populations. As a result, many LEP Asian Americans received much-delayed relief or were completely denied disaster relief. When the relief did come, it was not culturally appropriate and did not fit the needs of the more marginalized ethnic communities.

For example, FEMA registration could only be accomplished over the phone or internet. The FEMA hotline did not have any options for LEP populations. The internet registration interface was in English, and most relief volunteers had to walk evacuees through the process. The FEMA system crashed many times due to system overload. Furthermore, when hundreds of Vietnamese Americans received their initial \$2000 cash disbursement for emergency needs (many Vietnamese Americans used the BPSOS Houston address because they could not use their permanent address), mass confusion erupted because the checks were issued with no social security number and no FEMA registration ID number (easy and simple ways to distinguish checks). The lack of Romanization of names in the Vietnamese language contributed to the confusion (Vietnamese surnames are often considered first names by native Vietnamese). Relief volunteers had to call the overloaded FEMA hotline each time in order to trace the check to the FEMA registration ID number. This was a monumental oversight in the FEMA system that delayed assistance to hundreds of Asian American evacuees.

A significant number of Asian American victims did not receive the initial cash assistance made available through the Red Cross for those who were not registered with FEMA. As a result, the Asian American Justice Center (AAJC) worked with other advocates to successfully push for extensions of the FEMA/SBA registration deadline. The American Red Cross joined in support of AAJC's letter to FEMA and DHS. AAJC also alerted local Asian American groups and leaders to the effort.

The American Red Cross recognized that they did not have an adequate strategy or work plan for outreach work or providing disaster relief services to the immigrant communities. In response to AAJC's concerns and recommendations, the Red Cross committed to ensuring that at least some combination of Red Cross staff and volunteers are bilingual. In an effort to try to improve their services to immigrant communities, particularly those with limited English proficiency, the Red Cross has agreed to engage in on-going Katrina debriefing discussions with AAJC and asked AAJC to help facilitate new relationships with other Asian American organizations.

Overall, federal agencies and federally-funded relief agencies were completely noncompliant with Executive Order 13166, and the remedial action they took in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina failed to serve marginalized populations such as LEP Asian Americans. There is still much more needed to be done in order to fully allow LEP populations the access to much needed benefits and services.

### *Legislative Advocacy*

The failures of the government emergency management system made it clear that legislative reform is imperative. Congress has failed to take action for immigrant populations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Both the Congress and the Department of Homeland Security (which has jurisdiction over immigration services and enforcement) failed to understand and respond to the special challenges faced by the immigrant victims of Katrina. For example, Congress did not pass a bill for the immigrant evacuees of Katrina, as it did for the immigrant

victims of 9/11, which protected the rights of immigrant victims of the terrorist attack. Even where it has acted (as in the House of Representatives), Congress has refused to acknowledge the difference the logistical difference between 9/11 and the catastrophic and widespread loss of homes, businesses, schools, and community based organizations Cause by Hurricane Katrina.

Noncitizen victims of Hurricane Katrina were shut out from the relief they desperately needed from Congress. On September 21, 2005, the House passed the Immigration Relief for Hurricane Katrina Victims Act of 2005 (H.R. 3827), sponsored by Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI). The bill was inadequate in terms of meeting the immigration needs of noncitizen hurricane survivors. It allowed individuals who were being sponsored for a green card by a family member or employer to remain eligible for it, even if their sponsor died in the hurricane or they lost their job due to the hurricane.. It also extended certain filing and reentry deadlines, gave foreign students until February 2006 to enroll in a new school, and temporarily relaxed I-9 employment verification rules. This law affected thousands of Asian American green card holders, many who were trying to sponsor direct family members through the immediate family visa system.

However, the bill did nothing for the vast majority of temporary workers and other non-immigrants that lost their immigration status as a result of the storm – for example, due to the loss of their jobs. Only in the event of a worker’s disability or death would the bill grant a one-year extension of stay to the temporary worker and/or his immediate family. Many saw this as a “stingy” grant of benefits to the thousands of immigrants who had lost everything in the disaster.

In late summer of 2006, a bill titled “Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006” emerged as a comprehensive solution for the government failures during Hurricane Katrina. This bill offered hope for LEP populations, as it endeavored to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to immigrant and underserved populations. For example, Regional Coordinators hired by the newly formed National Emergency Management Agency would be required to examine and cater to the demographics of the area under their responsibility. One section was dedicated to language assistance services in the event of a disaster and mandated that FEMA had to provide emergency information in different languages for LEP populations. Furthermore, FEMA also had to create a database of best practices for language assistance. This legislation passed, and in 2007, FEMA began creating implementation plans through working groups.

In late August 2006, Democratic Congressional House leaders visited the Gulf Coast region and were appalled by the lack of progress in rebuilding the area. Nancy Pelosi and other leaders outlined an agenda that included reforming the insurance industry, working on housing issues, and improving the education system in the Gulf. However, LEP populations and underserved populations were left out of the agenda. This gap needs to be further addressed with education and advocacy.

### **VIII. Success Stories and New Disaster Relief Models**

While the inadequacies of the response from the federal government and mainstream providers in assisting LEP populations, specifically Asian Americans, was clearly evident as the Katrina crisis unfolded during 2006, success stories and new models for serving minority and LEP populations after a disaster also emerged through national, regional, and local relief efforts.

- **Local and regional Unmet Needs Committees assisted hundreds of Asian Americans:** The United Way of Houston, Texas and Catholic Charities received and disbursed hundreds of thousands of dollars to assist Hurricane Katrina evacuees with unmet needs. BPSOS of Houston was given \$50,000 each from United Way and the Neighborhood Centers. This money was unrestricted and could be used in any way to push along the long term recovery process. The funds were used to assist Asian Americans with relocation costs, rental assistance, health expenses, and funeral costs.
- **Distribution of sideband radios to Asian Americans in Gulf Coast:** Many Asian Americans received delayed emergency announcements because television and mainstream radio announcements were only in English. Local agencies such as BPSOS, Bo De Temple of New Orleans have proactively distributed sideband radios that can broadcast public emergency announcements in Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian dialects. The only flaw with this system is that the station was not directly connected to the National Weather Agency or other federal agencies responsible for disseminating emergency and evacuation announcements.
- **New asset building program assisted dozens of Asian Americans with buying a new homes:** Citibank and BPSOS collaborated to create an Individual Development Accounts program where 40 evacuees who qualified would be able to receive a 2 to 1 match for every dollar they placed into a special banking account for a new home. This assists Asian American evacuees who have no credit or cannot borrow funds and were rejected by SBA loan assistance.
- **Bush/Clinton fund reimbursed several Asian American faith based organizations:** Several faith based organizations based in New Orleans, Biloxi and Bayou la Batre (Lady of La Vang Church, Van Duc Temple, and Bayou La Batre temple respectively) were each reimbursed by the Bush/Clinton fund in the average amount of \$30,000 for the expenses they incurred during the disaster relief and response efforts. A BPSOS caseworker assisted these faith based organizations with their applications. They used these funds to repair the damage to their churches and temples.
- **The Chef Menteur Landfill controversy mobilized the Vietnamese American evacuee community and made it more visible to local elected officials:** NAVASA fellows stationed at the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church became active in what is now known as the Chef Menteur Landfill controversy. City officials, in an effort to expedite the city-wide cleaning up process, waived certain requirements to allow dumping at a location near the New Orleans East Vietnamese American community. Residents protested, complaining of health and environmental hazards. The Department of Fish and Wildlife also opposed the move. Mayor Nagin at first did not budge, stating that cleaning up New Orleans was a priority. Town hall meetings and mobilization of the community were organized. In the end, the City of New Orleans allowed the waiver to expire, and dumping officials decided to comply with local authorities. This controversy, however, demonstrated the ability of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church to make it and its parishioners visible to public officials and the media. The event served as a model for media communications and mobilization for smaller, frequently marginalized communities during disasters.

The above examples demonstrate strategies in which local communities were able to create success stories from the devastation of governmental red tape. Communities leveraged local resources and manpower to connect marginalized Asian Americans to mainstream relief and preparedness initiatives. Such strategies served as best practices and would be applicable to other regions with similar demographics and resource pools.

#### **VIV. Continuing Failures and Impediments to Rebuilding and Recovery for Asian Americans**

While successful models to respond to the gaps in governmental relief were developed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the mistakes in the initial months of the disaster continued to impact Asian American Katrina evacuees:

- **Asian American immigrants continued to be impacted by the disaster due to lack of comprehensive immigration reform and disconnect in immigration services:** In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, thousands of Asian American refugees and immigrants seeking immigration benefits at Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) were directly impacted by the closing of the New Orleans office, one of the central CIS offices in the region that also served Biloxi clients. This caused a delay in receiving green cards, renewing green cards, attaining citizenship, and receiving benefits for Asian American evacuees. Many Vietnamese American evacuees reported lost, delayed or rescheduled naturalization applications and appointments.
- **Due to lack of permanent and affordable housing solutions, many Asian American evacuees had to continue renting apartments and seeking rental assistance from FEMA:** Because of the demand for housing, and the lack thereof, most evacuees are still seeking rental assistance from FEMA. In addition, dozens of Vietnamese families in Houston had to enter the recertification process for renewing their housing contract with a FEMA contractor because they could not move back to New Orleans. In rural areas such as Bayou La Batre, Alabama, evacuees were still living in condemned trailer homes years later due to bureaucratic tape in the release of federal funding and lack of access to housing information at the local level. Affordable housing policies continued to have a strong impact on low income Asian Americans in the South.
- **Because SBA was never in compliance with Executive Order 13166, thousands of Asian American fishermen and small business owners were completely denied assistance:** In addition to having a lack of Asian bilingual workers or translators, SBA's computerized eligibility system also shut out thousands of small business owners and Vietnamese fishermen applying for loans to recover their livelihoods. When SBA applications were submitted, certain data was automatically entered into a computer, which then generated an acceptance or denial based on an automated analysis. This left no room for cultural or linguistically appropriate screenings of loan applications. Thousands of Asian Americans denied loan assistance gave up and borrowed from friends and family. Over 30 percent of the fishermen in the Gulf Coast had to give up their boats and livelihoods to become odd jobs men or contractors.

- **The FEMA recoupment<sup>12</sup> process may have denied many Asian American evacuees the chance to rebuild financial assets:** There were reports from case workers and FEMA officers in Houston and New Orleans that some Asian American evacuees received letters from FEMA demanding money owed due to assistance overpayment. The recoupment process was started for various reasons, mainly because FEMA operated on a “pay now, ask for it later” basis. FEMA made mistakes by making multiple payments to households or mistakenly paying for relief items when it should not have. FEMA checks were not accompanied by any letters or notes regarding how the funds should be expended. Low income individuals quickly cashed the checks, and most evacuees did not have any savings to pull from in order to pay the debt. The recoupment process also had many language assistance problems, as LEP populations did not understand the check disbursement process and how to track the use of their funds. The recoupment process continues to be a nightmare for low income LEP Asian Americans, and one that promises to plunge many low income Asians deeper into poverty.
- **Administration of federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding in the Biloxi Mississippi area may have violated Executive Order 13166 and left out hundreds of Vietnamese Americans hoping to access the funds:** One year after Hurricane Katrina, a NAVASA fellow issued a report detailing the economic development and community development plans in Biloxi<sup>13</sup>. The current plan, authored by contractor Living Cities, proposed a tourist-driven plan to build up casinos, parks, restaurants, small businesses, and build out boardwalks. Some of the tracts upon which the company would be building were right on top of homes of Vietnamese who could not repair and buy new homes. Many Vietnamese American households could not apply for the millions of dollars of CDBG funding made available to Biloxi residents due to eligibility requirements. In addition, sessions hosted to educate the community about CDBG funding did not provide language assistance for those who did not speak English. Later on, due to advocacy from NAVASA, some CDBG funds were disbursed, but with still a large portion of Asian Americans left out. Mississippi continued to struggle to disburse all of its CDBG funding while hundreds of evacuees desperately need funds to rebuild new homes.

It was clear that a couple years after Hurricane Katrina, serious flaws in the immigration system, SBA, FEMA, housing development, and local government authorities continued to have a large impact on Asian American evacuees. Furthermore, debates have begun and continued to escalate in regarding the rebuilding plans of communities in Louisiana and Mississippi. As local government agencies recovered and began planning and implementing, it is important that Asian Americans have a voice in the process for their businesses and neighborhoods. Furthermore, it is important that Asian Americans continue to advocate for systemic change, especially when the system has completely left them out.

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<sup>12</sup> The recoupment process is typically initiated by FEMA sending out thousands of letters post-disaster to evacuees in order to verify social security numbers. The philosophy of this process is that FEMA will “pay now, ask questions later.” At the close of 2006, FEMA sent out 60,000 letters demanding that evacuees verify their social security number. Lack of verification sent evacuee claims into recoupment.

<sup>13</sup> See “The Invisible Tide: Vietnamese Americans in Biloxi, Mississippi” Report issued by NAVASA, authored by Uyen Le. Available via internet at <http://www.navasa.org>.

## **Conclusion**

As advocates, service providers, governmental agencies, and other government accountability entities looked back at Hurricane Katrina, it was apparent that institutional change and reform is imperative to prepare for the next catastrophic disaster to strike United States soil. Asian Americans in the Gulf Coast were one of the largest LEP segments ever affected by a United States natural disaster. For decades, the government and large agencies have grown immune to pleas for language assistance, interpreters, and translators, especially when it affected small segments of the population – but Hurricane Katrina changed these practices. While Katrina demonstrated the value and effectiveness of community networks, collaborations, ingenious advocacy models, and a nationwide volunteer effort, serving LEP and ethnic populations will take serious planning and institutional reform, especially in federal, state, and local governments that are so vital to mainstream emergency planning. The next few years are essential to incorporating these lessons learned into our new national conscience. Communities and organizations cannot stop pressuring our leaders for these changes, especially when lives and families are at stake.