

Lessons for the Holidays: Learning From a Disaster



This year’s holiday season, with its themes of giving and renewal, comes on the heels of a major disaster. DHR’s response to Katrina revealed a lot about us as a health and human service agency. It revealed many things about the individuals who work at DHR. It also told us a lot about the vulnerable families we serve. We can reflect on these lessons as we spend time at home with our own families.

What do we see when we look in the mirror that Katrina held up to us?

First we see a large number of dedicated employees who went to shelters, who opened their offices late and on weekends and who made a difference by doing so. We see that our services are important to vulnerable individuals and families, to seniors, to children and to people disconnected from community and family.

We got folks their child support, their TANF check and their WIC nutrition vouchers. We gave them health checks and got them the medication they depend on. We gave them mental health counseling and checked on seniors who needed nursing care.

We helped a large number of people. How?

We overcame bureaucratic barriers. We streamlined our rules for food stamps, TANF and WIC. We forgot about traditional office hours and traditional office locations. We got it done by putting the needs of evacuees first.

We got the job done by working with other agencies – public and private. We worked at Red Cross shelters with professionals and volunteers from other agencies. We worked with food banks to get food to evacuees. We worked with pharmacies and drug companies to get medication to those in need. We worked with social service agencies in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana to coordinate services and benefits. This is just a partial list of our partners.

We got innovative. The ombudsman who found donated airlift services for a senior who wanted to get home to a nursing home near her family was not following standard operating procedures.

When we work together and when we work across agency lines for a common good we are capable of extraordinary service. When we put our customers first we do great things. When we innovate and find new ways to serve we succeed.

The last lesson from Katrina involves the vulnerable families we serve. When we looked at the cable news and saw the people at the New Orleans Convention Center and at the Superdome we were shocked. More than one reporter cried, “This is America, how can this happen here?”

The people left in New Orleans were folks who could not afford a bus ticket. They couldn’t afford a motel room in Shreveport or San Antonio. Many didn’t have social supports like those provided by friends, family, community and church.

We have too many families like this in Georgia and it is our job to help them — to strengthen them. All of our efforts on behalf of Georgia’s children depend on parents, responsible adults and families. And children are our future. The future of our state depends on the strength and resilience of Georgia’s families.

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Stormy Weather: Helping the Evacuees

Barbara Joye

With the exception of Texas, no state has taken in more hurricane evacuees than Georgia. While the bulk of the storm victims came to the metro Atlanta area, thousands of evacuees also came to Columbus, Augusta, Valdosta, Savannah, Macon and many other cities and towns across the state. At the height of the crisis DHR employees in counties across the state assessed evacuees' medical and other needs and staffed 14 Red Cross shelters and other service centers. Wherever hurricane victims were, DHR staff stood ready to help.

The **Division of Public Health's** epidemiologists provided preliminary medical screenings to people arriving at Dobbins Air Reserve Base and at the shelters. They also visited shelters to look for signs of infectious disease among the evacuees and take steps to prevent outbreaks if necessary. Fortunately, no disease outbreaks were found.

The Office of Nursing mobilized more than 200 volunteer nurses – including many who work at county health departments and DHR offices – through the Georgia Nurse Alert System.

The Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program relaxed income and residency requirements so that women and children could have immediate access to WIC food vouchers. The AIDS Drug Assistance Program also created a simplified application to make it faster and easier for HIV-positive evacuees to obtain medications and medical care.

Through coordination with the Georgia Partnership for Caring Foundation the Office of Pharmacy worked directly with drug manufacturers and Georgia pharmacies to transport and distribute donated medicines to evacuees. The office also helped refer people to pharmacies that offer free medications, and found additional manufacturers willing to donate.

The Immunization Program used their on-line immunization registry to link with registries in the affected areas to locate children's immunization records that are required within 30 days of enrolling in school (see "One Less Thing to Worry About").

Division of Family and Children Services

(DFCS) offices in metro Atlanta and across the state stayed open late and on weekends to process Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid and Food Stamp applications. DFCS also cut red tape for the evacuees by waiving many requirements, including residency, for Food Stamps and TANF.

DFCS worked with welfare authorities in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama to make sure no one fell through the cracks. Local offices served as temporary addresses for correspondence between evacuees and officials in their home states. DFCS also worked with local community food banks and other agencies to provide emergency food and clothing. Above all, no one was to be turned away without the aid they needed.

The **Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases (MHDDAD)**, working through DHR's Emergency Operations Center, supported the National Disaster Medical System, American Red Cross shelters and resource and recovery centers. The Cobb Community Service Board worked with people arriving at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, while MHDDAD state office staff provided on-call support. Community Service Boards and other contract providers throughout the state worked in shelters providing psychological first aid, doing needs assessments and making referrals to state mental health services when necessary. State office staff worked at the resource and recovery centers in College Park, Marietta and Lawrenceville, and the DeKalb Community Service Board staffed the DeKalb County Recovery Center.

Developmental disabilities support coordinators visited shelters on a regular basis to determine if any individuals with mental retardation or developmental disabilities were being housed in shelters, so they could assess needs and make recommendations for services.

Community service providers served approximately 176 evacuees, and 18 people were served in state hospitals. As is the case for most disaster events, MHDDAD expects that mental health needs will increase after the evacuees' immediate employment and housing needs are met. MHDDAD is working on a long-term plan to identify and serve evacuees with chronic mental health needs.



Katrina Relief

The **Office of Child Support Enforcement** is helping evacuees provide their current address in Georgia to their home state's child support office so any support checks issued to them can be redirected. Also, evacuees who need enforcement of child support orders may apply for services here without paying the usual \$25 fee. After that, because Georgia uses debit cards and direct deposit instead of paper checks, they can change their address as needed without having to worry about whether the payment will catch up with them.

The **Long Term Care Ombudsman Office** identified 139 Katrina evacuees and 45 Rita evacuees in Georgia

nursing homes and shared this information with appropriate federal and state agencies. They also helped people seeking missing loved ones and made sure that evacuees received the services they needed.

Today, most storm victims have found more permanent housing and many have found gainful employment and enrolled their children in local schools. For them as well as for those still in need of public assistance, DHR stands ready to provide the help and support they need to establish themselves as residents of Georgia, whether permanently or until they can resume their lives back home.

Katrina Relief, First Hand Accounts

"I Was Proud to Be There"

Pat Clifford, director of investigations, MHDDAD

I'm a licensed clinical social worker, and I served as a mental health counselor. First I worked at the Red Cross shelter at the 4-H camp in Covington, in Newton County. It was a nice setting, with cabins, a lake, and places for the children to play. We went around asking people what they needed. Most at that shelter had evacuated just before the storm hit so the process was relatively orderly. Then, I went to the College Park service center the first day it opened and there were thousands of people waiting even before the doors opened. Many had waited for days, hours at a time, at other Red Cross centers. Early on we were really just trying to manage chaos.

The resilience of these people was really remarkable in spite of all they had been through. Their mental health needs were not urgent, for the most part. I talked to people and reassured them that their response to the disaster was what anyone would experience. I helped them find housing, get in the right line, get vouchers, and find family members. We all did whatever was needed.

Some people had true mental health crisis needs. We did some counseling on site and arranged appointments for them with community service providers. Some were running out of medications, so we arranged for them to see a doctor who



could prescribe what they needed. No one I worked with needed hospitalization.

As I was walking down the lines talking to people I noticed one fellow in obvious distress. He was experiencing a lot of trauma. I spent several hours with him, got someone from the local community service board to talk with him and take him to a doctor for his medications. In my experience the community service boards were extraordinary in this disaster. They were very compassionate and did whatever it took. They stepped right up to the plate.

I followed up with the same man three times after he was moved to a hotel in College Park that housed 300 evacuees. At that point I was on one of the DHR "outreach assessment teams" that visited people in the hotels. We organized services there, for example getting the Red Cross to come and provide vouchers for people who didn't have them yet or were having trouble with the EBT cards. At the hotels the response was extraordinary from all the agencies: Fulton Public Health and Mental Health, Clayton Mental Health, all supporting people's needs.

The College Park service center was one of the best DHR experiences I've had. There were so many people there from DHR, including Division of Aging Services, Division of Public Health, DFCS, and Information Technology guys setting up computers. It was well coordinated, a huge team of people who knew what to do and did their jobs in a professional way. I was proud to be there.



Katrina Relief, First Hand Accounts

"I'm Glad I Saw it First Hand."

Crystal Eskola, Family Independence case manager II,
Columbia County DFCS

Crystal Eskola joined many staff from DFCS Region 7 who volunteered to spend several days away from home helping Katrina evacuees at service centers in Metro Atlanta. By day she took Medicaid and food stamp applications at the Gwinnett County megacenter and slept at a motel at night. She also worked for a few days at the May Park center in Augusta.

Usually it takes a week to 10 days to get a food stamp card, but DFCS gave the evacuees a "disaster" card that they could use right away. Eskola interviewed applicants, explained benefits, and helped people get to other services they needed. She also provided the Red Cross's 1-800 number for people trying to locate family members.

"I could tell a lot of stories," says Eskola. "One young couple had just made the second payment on their first house. Their belongings were still boxed up and now they've lost everything but still have to make the house payments. A lot of frustrated people were trying to deal with mortgage and insurance companies. One man was crying because of the toll all this had taken on his brother, a police officer stationed at the Superdome in New Orleans. His brother's friend was one of the policemen who had committed suicide.

"I met a woman with special needs who couldn't read or write. She had a routine back home where she could take a bus every day and work at a poultry plant killing chickens. She wanted another job here just like that one but there aren't any poultry plants in Atlanta on a bus line. The sister she was staying with didn't help her much. I walked her to the lines for housing, Social Security and the Department of Labor. Her sister came and took her home before she got all the resources she needed and I didn't see her again. It was sad. She had learned to function on her own and now she's just lost. You don't think about what something like a disaster does to the special needs community."

Eskola observed that elderly people were another group hard hit by dislocation. "One lady in her 70s had never been outside of New Orleans, and now she had just traveled through three states before coming to Georgia. Two genteel sisters,



one in her 70s and one in her 80s, had to leave with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They didn't have their back braces, support shoes or eyeglasses. Those didn't qualify as emergency needs. Appointments were made for them to get what they needed, but the appointment dates were weeks away. For them it was a real hardship.

"Working at the centers was great, I'm glad I saw it first hand."

"One Less Thing to Worry About"

Leonard Lang, consultant, Immunization Program,
Division of Public Health



When Leonard Lang began work at the DeKalb Disaster Relief Services Center for Katrina evacuees he found that very few people had packed a copy of their children's immunization records. If their doctor's office was under water and the records weren't on their home state's central database, they would have a difficult time documenting their children's immunization history.

"It has been a great experience helping the victims of hurricane Katrina try to find their immunization records," says Lang. "It has also been disheartening not being able to locate the records for children who had received shots but are not in their state's immunization registry. We found out that most parents assumed that all providers, public and private, would automatically enter all shots in the state registry. Some parents walked away very angry and frustrated."

Based on their experience with the evacuees, Lang said he and other Immunization Program staff decided to strengthen their outreach to Georgia medical providers to make sure they enter childhood immunization records into the Georgia Registry of Immunization Transactions and Services (GRITS) electronic record database. That way, if families from this state have to relocate in an emergency at least their children's immunization records will be one less thing they'll have to worry about.



The **Secret Santa** program collects funds and gifts to provide holiday presents to foster children who otherwise might not receive any. For information about how you can contribute, ask your division or office director for the name of your Secret Santa program representative.



"Tiring, Stressful, Rewarding... Just Like Working for DFCS Every Day!"

Sylvia Jackson, Baker and Calhoun County DFCS Director

On Wednesday September 7, 2005, many Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) staff went to the Red Cross office in Atlanta to help Katrina evacuees. When we hiked up the hill to the Red Cross building we saw long lines of people who needed help. Snacks and water were available to them, but there they waited in the hot sun.



Some DFCS employees who could key in to the software were immediately sent to help enter Food Stamp applications that had already been received from evacuees. Those of us who were left received a quick course in how to be a Red Cross caseworker. It did not matter what your job title was with DFCS, you were now a caseworker who took applications for Red Cross assistance. We were told that 500 applications had to be taken that day, and they had already taken 200. After that, we began taking applications. DFCS employees were not the only caseworkers there, but we certainly helped meet that goal.

That night we were told to return at 8 am the next morning. It was quite an eventful drive in to work for those of us from small rural counties. We processed applications, then showed clients to another line where they waited to see staff from a bank, then were transported by bus to one bank branch that had enough money to cash their vouchers, then were transported back to the Red Cross office.

After seeing clients all day we were told that Red Cross megacenters were opening the next day, so DFCS staff would be divided between two sites: one in Marietta and one in Lawrenceville. Some staff moved to a hotel closer to the Lawrenceville site. A lot of us worked all day, every day for a full week. The days ran together.

All the clients I saw were very appreciative of the people who were helping them. They would say that they knew we were tired, not mentioning that some of them had stood in lines since early morning and not seen a caseworker until almost dark. When the clients talked, and many did, they would tell their experiences, some of which we can't even imagine.

There was a woman who watched someone drown. There was the elderly gentleman whose wife is in a nursing home in Louisiana who had gone back to visit her since he left. He flew from Atlanta, but could not get a flight into the town where he needed to go because someone would not take a check from any of the towns where they had evacuated. He took a cab 200 miles to see his ailing wife and had \$7 left after that. Yet, they all expressed their appreciation for our help.

Mental health workers were available to staff and clients. A mental health worker aided a client who had no identification showing an address in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, which we had to have to process applications. He did have an automobile insurance card. The mental health worker helped him make a telephone call to the insurance company, which faxed a copy of his policy that had his Louisiana address. Tears changed to smiles! He would need this identification to show to other agencies as well.

None of us could have gone to these sites if we had not had support from our staff and others who "stepped up to the plate" and saw that DFCS business went on, as it should. Tiring? Yes! Stressful? Yes! Rewarding? Most definitely! Just like working for DFCS everyday!

Don't Forget to Give

YOU have until December 31 to turn in your contribution form for this year's State Charitable Contributions Program (SCCP) if you haven't already done so. Commissioner B. J. Walker wants every DHR employee to participate. You can direct your contribution to one or more on a list of 88 charitable groups and federations. She reminds us that the many organizations benefited by the drive "directly affect your personal lives and the quality of life in Georgia. In addition, many of these organizations will be our partners in helping the displaced residents of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi rebuild their lives after Katrina."

If that's not reason enough, how about team spirit? Our work units will compete to see which division and which office has the highest rate of participation. Still not enough to get you reaching for your checkbook? If you pledge at least \$1 per month to SCCP you will qualify for a chance to win special prizes. Contribute more and you may qualify for a chance to win the most valuable prizes. But most important, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you've helped make a difference. That's a great way to start the holiday season!



“My Life Has Been Enriched and Blessed”

Leslie J. Richmond, M.D., medical director/acting director, Personal Health Services, DeKalb County Board of Health

My experience at the DeKalb Disaster Relief Service Center was extremely rewarding. I encountered people of various ages, ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of the evacuees told stories of their struggle, survival and uncertainty regarding the future.



I spent three weeks at the center. As a physician I wrote prescriptions, counseled evacuees on where to get the prescriptions filled, gave out free medical supplies and referred patients to partner organizations for long-term care. Referrals for eyeglasses were a common need. Most patients were adults, particularly the elderly. However, we also offered on-site WIC services for pregnant women and children.

My encounter with a middle-aged woman from New Orleans gave me a glimpse of the suffering evacuees endured while waiting to be rescued from the Superdome. She repeatedly reminded me, through tears, that the public could never understand the magnitude of the Superdome situation. She insisted that the things she witnessed and experienced should never happen to anyone.

Due to my work at the service center, I realize that my daily issues simply are not that significant in comparison to the issues the Hurricane Katrina survivors are going through. I went to the service center to help others and as a result my life has been enriched and blessed in immeasurable ways.

“It Just Humbles You”

Karen Palmer, Area Nurse Manger, North Health District, Division of Public Health



I spent the past two weeks at the Red Cross shelter located in the Georgia Baptist Conference Center in Toccoa, and I'm still here, taking care of people with special needs.

We were told that the shelter would be receiving family members of people

who had been placed at hospitals and nursing homes, but they turned out to be the patients themselves. They might have a physical need like oxygen, or have a mental health condition and be functional but need medication and monitoring.

One woman had delivered a baby by C-section two days before she was evacuated. She went to a hospital in Atlanta for a week, then came to the shelter with her new baby. She's also recovering from an infection, and the baby is having some feeding problems. That's an example of some of the people we're helping.

Most of the people at this shelter were evacuated from Texas just before Rita hit Beaumont, Port Arthur and other places. We have 48 people and we've placed three in local nursing homes. The administrator of one of the homes is here volunteering, with some of her staff. We have two nurses from the Red Cross disaster team and Public Health nurses volunteer here every day, plus some other nurses from the community. The Baptists also send volunteers who pick up medications and other supplies people need, do the laundry and so on. It's been a huge effort for them.

It's definitely been challenging, but very rewarding. It's a small thing to do for people who've lost everything. It's sad to see them coming in with all their belongings in a trash bag. It didn't matter that the first group came in at 1:30 in the morning. They were so tired after being on a cargo plane, then going through triage at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, then riding the bus to get here. That just humbles you.

 THE HUMAN SIDE 

The purpose of The Human Side is to provide interesting and important information related to DHR employees and their jobs.

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“Human Beings Coming Together to Support Each Other”

Beth Filson, project manager, Georgia Certified Peer Specialist Project, MHDDAD

We were all riveted to the news bulletins until it was time to schedule people to go to Dobbins Air Reserve Base where evacuees needing services were arriving. I really wanted to give my time and be face to face with people who had gone through so much. For two Saturdays I was on a team of three people from MHDDAD and two others who came later for the evening shift.



Our charge was to link consumers of mental health services from the Gulf states to services in Georgia. We expected to refer people to the mental health agencies in the counties where they were currently staying in order to minimize as much as possible interruptions to counseling and support services. It turned out that a lot of people really just needed human contact, someone to talk to. We were under a sign saying “Mental Health,” so they came to us.

One man said his younger brother was really having problems. They had tried to get to the New Orleans Convention Center but had turned back due to the chaos there. Along with an elderly woman they had sort of holed up, going out to look for

food until they were finally spotted and rescued from a balcony.

The young man kept saying “I’m not crazy, I’m not jammed up!” I said “I know, it’s OK, I bet you just have a lot of stories to tell. Everyone has stories to tell.” So we started walking around and around the megacenters and he told me some of his stories. They were powerful, human, about brotherhood and survival. It was important to move out of the realm of illness, to let it be what it was, about human experience – connecting and being allowed to be in shock or grieving, whatever.

Our team very early realized that we were there for whatever someone needed at the moment, whether it was a doctor, a wheelchair or someone to listen. I wouldn’t have traded the experience for anything. I wish to God it hadn’t happened, but it did.

In July we had trained ten certified peer specialists in a pilot program so they could return to their agencies and help people deal with trauma as well as recovery from mental illness. When suddenly Katrina hit we all understood that this was not about saying some people are responding abnormally and others are not, not about assessment and diagnosis. We were all responding to horror. It was an equalizer, human beings coming together to support each other.

The work I’ve done as a certified peer specialist and my own experience with mental illness and trauma really informed my work with the evacuees. All of us just need to come together as people. We don’t need to go to a special place. It’s devastating to lose your community. That’s what Katrina showed us.

Snapshots from Katrina



Alpha Bryan, M.D., director, Cobb and Douglas Public Health District, accompanies a patient being transported from a National Defense Medical Service Medivac plane to the triage area at Dobbins Air Reserve Base for treatment and stabilization before transfer to a hospital.



(l-r) Louisiana evacuee Rhonda Robinson gets help locating her children's immunization records from Immunization Program Consultants **Angela Bumphus** and **Tommy Lang**.



DHR Hires People Displaced by Katrina

Barbara Joye

DHR has hired three people displaced by hurricane Katrina and is looking for others who may qualify for jobs as social workers, nurses and other positions in the department's many health and social service programs. Information about these opportunities is available at the Office of Human Resources Management and Development (OHRMD) Website: www.dhrjobs.com. A special email address has been developed for Katrina evacuees, Katrina@dhrjobs.com.

"We are going out of our way to help qualified people evacuated from other states find positions within DHR," says OHRMD Recruitment and Selection Services Director **Bill Krysak**. "We will even help them prepare their resume, because many of them came here with no papers. Shortly after the storm we hired three people displaced by Katrina to work in county departments of Family and Children Services (DFCS) as social services case managers starting October 1st."

One of the three new case managers, **Latosha Santa Marina**, has been living with 23 family members in College Park since evacuating from Jefferson Parish, Louisiana on the Sunday before Katrina struck. She will work in the Fulton County DFCS office, helping place children in foster care.

"I really appreciate everything DHR did for me, because I'm in dire need of employment," she said. "I can't get my transcript from my university in New Orleans because their Website is partly down, so I'll get it later because I want to prove I have my degrees. It's frustrating because everything in New Orleans is down now. I look forward to working with DHR and living in Atlanta."

"We want to cut red tape when possible to help the people who have been evacuated, but they will also help us by filling critical positions that serve Georgia's families, such as child protective services," says OHRMD **Rosa Waymon**. "Our Website at www.dhrjobs.com has proved an effective way to identify qualified applicants since we launched it last year. Anyone is welcome to apply. We have many professional jobs that require credentials and experience, and we also offer entry-level positions."

ORS Staff Help Troops

Edna Jackson

Office of Regulatory Services (ORS) staff in Albany are helping to support American troops overseas. When **Debbie Travis**, ORS regional program director, told her co-workers about the anysoldier.com Website, everyone wanted to get involved. Since November 2004 they have sent about 400 packages and more than 400 cards and letters.

"The major purpose of our decision to support the anysoldier.com project is to find ways to let our military men and women in Iraq, Afghanistan and surrounding countries know we are thinking about them and are trying to improve their morale," said Travis. "The Website lists the names of soldiers and their specific needs. Most of their needs are for the simple pleasures we take for granted like personal hygiene items, snack foods, beverages, entertainment items, and cleaning supplies."

Some ORS staff have involved their churches, dentists, doctors, civic organizations, friends and families. They have gone from filling specific requests to having bookshelves stocked with donated items. However, postage is their biggest challenge. They wait until payday to send out packages. During "Employee Appreciation Week" ORS staff in Atlanta donated money and postage.

Other DHR staff housed in the same building have participated. The Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) contributed money and a bag of food and personal hygiene items. The Office of Investigative Services (OIS) donated money for shipping and other items. Packages have been sent to a DFCS support staff's husband who is serving in Iraq and an OIS employee's brother who is serving in Afghanistan.

Letters are included in care packages because many of the military personnel have limited family and friend support systems back home. "Although we do not expect to receive a letter or thanks for the letters and packages we send, many times we get a response. A few units have sent us a memento or a certificate of appreciation. One of the most inspiring was an American flag that was flown in a Blackhawk helicopter during a January 16, 2005 combat mission," said Travis.

She recalls, "When a young Marine named Eddy served in Iraq, he became sort of an office pen pal. In response to a package that he received from us, he sent us a letter telling us that

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DHR Staff Volunteer

Barbara Joye

In addition to the many DHR employees who served Katrina evacuees through their jobs – often working long hours or weekends – many of us pitched in as volunteers. Some housed relatives, friends or strangers from the storm-affected areas, while others gave supplies, gift cards or money.

The Division of Public Health set up a system for collecting contributions to co-workers housing evacuees who needed specific items such as food, clothes or bedding.

The staff of Central State Hospital raised \$3,000 to contribute to the Red Cross.

After one employee of the Augusta Office of Child Support Enforcement volunteered at the local Salvation Army and told co-workers about the needs of families she met – reporting that some didn't even have a toothbrush – they responded by providing personal hygiene supplies and gift cards for 14 people.

Gordon County DFCS staff were offered a chance to “buy” a casual day when they could wear T-shirts and jeans to work if they donated to the American Red Cross fund for Katrina relief.

Those are just a few creative group efforts by DHR staff that were reported to the Human Side. There's no way to count how many other employees volunteered individually at shelters and service centers or joined in fund raising drives

through their churches and community organizations. The Human Side salutes all our co-workers who responded so generously to this emergency.



(l-r) Ina Givens, Tom Duval, Rachel Krause, Consuelo Campbell, Carolyn Aidman and Elana Morris of the Division of Public Health's Family Health Branch collected items for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

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it had come the week of his 21st birthday. That package with letters from a group of strangers was the only one that he got.” She adds, “If a military person takes the time to answer our letters, then at least one of us writes back to him or her. They become real people to us, not just the anonymous recipient of a package. We do not expect to become life-long friends, but merely a person from home who cares about their well-being in this dangerous and stressful experience.”

Gwendra



Gwendra Samuels at her desk with Commissioner B. J. Walker

TeenWorks

Gwendra Samuels worked this summer as an office assistant for Commissioner B. J. Walker at Two Peachtree Street in Atlanta, through the TeenWork program. She did so well that she was hired to continue on full time after the program ended. She also attends Georgia Perimeter College, where she is majoring in business.

Gwendra is one of 418 foster children ages 14-21 who worked for six weeks this summer through TeenWork, which was sponsored by DHR and the First Lady's Children's Cabinet. Most were employed by DHR, while some found jobs at Coca-Cola, Chick-Fil-A, Waffle House or other state agencies. The program gave them their first work experience and a chance to learn marketable skills. This was the first statewide summer jobs program for foster children in Georgia, and the sponsors hope to expand it next year.

“I never thought that someone like me could end up working in a place as amazing as the Commissioner's Office,” says Gwendra. “I was in an atmosphere of elegance, class, professionalism, and intelligence. This wouldn't have been possible if it were not for the First Lady and her supporters. They looked past the stereotypes of a foster teen and gave us a chance. It made me realize that no matter what I've been through, there is hope for me to succeed.”





In August **Commissioner B. J. Walker** named **Mary Dean Harvey** director of the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). “Mary Harvey brings a rare combination of impassioned advocacy and hands-on managerial experience,” said Walker. “Georgia’s DFCS employees will be happy to know that

she understands what it’s like on the front lines.”

A Louisiana native, Harvey served as director of Nebraska’s Department of Social Services from 1991 to 1995. Most recently, she managed the Omaha Public School System’s “Safe Schools Healthy Students” initiative, a network of service providers for disadvantaged children and their families. She has also been president and CEO of the Boy’s and Girl’s Club of Omaha and executive director of Girls Incorporated of Omaha, where she created that city’s first mentoring program for young women. Harvey earned a B.A. in political science from Grambling University and a Masters in Science in secondary education and certification in educational administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.



Robert B. Dorr, CIA, CGFM, CGAP has been named director of the Office of Audits, where he has worked since 1999. Earlier, he served as an accountant with the Three Rivers Community Service Board.

“For several years DHR has benefited from Robert Dorr’s outstanding skills, professionalism and dedication,” says **Commissioner B. J. Walker**. “I am delighted to be able to appoint him to lead this important office.”

Dorr is a member of the Institute of Internal Auditors, the Georgia Fiscal Management Council and the Georgia Society of Mayflower Descendants. He is also a member of the executive committee of the Atlanta Chapter of the Association of Government Accountants and editor of the chapter newsletter. Originally from New Orleans, Dorr has lived in Georgia for 14 years and earned a B.B.A. degree from Kennesaw State University.



Tangler Gray was chosen to participate in a five-woman Circle of Survivors that opened and closed the annual three-day, 60-mile Susan G. Komen Foundation Three-Day Breast Cancer Walk across Metro Atlanta in September. A fiscal operations manager for the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), Gray has looked forward to joining the march since her own diagnosis with breast cancer in 2002. Her doctor declared her ready this year, so she started training in April. She raised \$2,302 for the cause, mostly from fellow OCSE staff – exceeding the \$2,000 goal required of each marcher. Together, the 2,500 marchers raised \$6.2 million for breast cancer research.

“This has been very challenging, but very moving,” says Gray. “Everyone was friendly and looking out for each other. People shared their stories.” She described how walkers were greeted by crowds of supporters and live music at designated “cheering stations” each day. “There were supporters at the cheering stations who were going through chemotherapy and radiation treatment themselves. Sixty miles is harder than it sounds, but it was really and truly a good experience.”



WHAT'S NEWS

On July 1st, 2005, the Georgia General Assembly passed the **Georgia Smokefree Air Act of 2005**, becoming the 12th state to pass a statewide smoking ban. Most public places in Georgia (worksites, restaurants, community centers, etc.) are now smoke-free environments. This law helps to reduce secondhand smoke, which causes cancer, is toxic and is considered a Class A carcinogen by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The ultimate goal of the law is to protect Georgians and visitors to our state from exposure to secondhand smoke. Often such policies motivate people to quit using tobacco.

To support Georgians quitting, DHR has a statewide toll free **Quit Line**: 1-877-270-STOP (7867) or 1-877-2NO-FUME (266-3863) or Hearing Impaired: TTY (1-877-777-6534). From the comfort of your private telephone you can receive expert advice on how to quit using all forms of tobacco, every day from 8 am to 12 midnight. For more information on the Act or the Quit Line, call 1-877-343-3340 or visit our Website: <http://dhr.georgia.gov/gasmokefreeair>. Live healthy, Georgia! Be smoke-free!

The state of Georgia recently launched a free Website, www.GAcollge411.org that provides a one-stop shop to help high school students and their parents make **college and career plans**. On this site, you or your children can explore careers; prepare for the SAT and ACT tests; compare more than 100 public and private Georgia colleges; learn about (and apply for) financial aid; and more. New this month: Students can apply online to many colleges at the same site.

The Division of Aging Services (DAS) has created a small reference guide called **"There's Never an Excuse for Elder Abuse and Neglect"** to direct mandatory reporters and professionals to the agencies that handle reports of alleged abuse, neglect and exploitation of elderly and disabled adults. The booklet provides facts on elder abuse; warning signs and indicators of abuse; what to do if you suspect abuse is occurring; what agencies to call; a list of people who are mandatory reporters; and a glossary. For more information or to obtain a copy of the booklet, contact DAS at 404-657-5258.

Family Matters, DHR's quarterly **newsletter for foster and adoptive parents**, celebrates its first anniversary this fall. You can read the first four issues at www.dfcs.dhr.Georgia.gov/familymatters. The newsletter provides policy updates, information about resources and supports for both foster and adoptive parents, articles on health and safety issues, and a parenting advice column by a psychologist.

The Division of Aging Services' **GeorgiaCares program** is holding information sessions across the state to tell people covered by the federal Medicare health insurance program how they can save money on their medications under the new **Medicare Prescription Drug Plan**. Starting November 15, anyone on Medicare can enroll in the new benefit, but they must choose among an array of different plans. Through the Area Agencies on Aging throughout the state, GeorgiaCares staff and volunteers are conducting the sessions to help people understand their prescription coverage options. They are also answering calls to a statewide hotline: 1-800-669-8387. You can call the hotline for information about the Medicare Prescription Drug Plan or for the date and location of a GeorgiaCares information session in your area.

Snapshots from Katrina



At the DHR Emergency Operations Center in Atlanta a multidivisional "outreach assessment team" prepares to visit groups of Katrina evacuees staying in hotels in Douglasville, find out their needs and link them to services: (l-r): **Mary Holliday**, MHDDAD; **Marilyn Reid**, MHDDAD; **Jacki Jackson**, DFCS; **Valencía Beckley**, nurse consultant; **Ken Duke**, DFCS; **Pat O'Neal**, PH; **Barbara Pastirik**, DAS.



Vicki Pilgrim: Walking the Walk

Lisa Moery



Vicki Pilgrim awards medals to a Golden Olympics swimming and cycling champion.

Vicki Pilgrim is one of those people who really walks the walk. Pilgrim, who has been involved in promoting physical activity for the Division of Public Health (PH) since 1974, believes that adults need to remain active throughout their lifetime. She helped found the Golden Olympics in Georgia in 1983 while she was a program consultant for older adults, and has been actively involved ever since.

The Golden Olympics is an annual sports competition for people 50 years old and over that took place this fall in Warner Robins. Pilgrim recruited a committee from staff of the Georgia Nursing Home Association, the Georgia Recreation and Parks Association, Robins Air Force Base and other agencies to help get it started. Since then, the Golden Olympics have grown from six events in the first year to 50, including 20 sports.

Pilgrim is more proud of helping seniors who want to remain independent and lead active lives than she is in seeing the number of events and sports increase. "It's so rewarding to see seniors realize how capable they really are," she says. "Men and women will come out because they are interested in improving or maintaining their health. I want them to be active, and want to do things that are fun."

Pilgrim recalls a woman who came to Warner Robins more than five years ago and wanted to participate but wasn't sure she could. After observing the 100-meter walk the woman said

that she would be back the next year. Not only did that woman participate the next year, but she also keeps on coming back with expanded goals. This year she won the race-walking event.

Pilgrim, who is now acting director for the population-based services section of PH's Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion Branch, continues to work hard to encourage all Georgians around the state to be active.

"Vicki Pilgrim's work with and commitment to the Golden Olympics serves as a model for us all," says **Kimberly Redding, MD, MPH** acting director for PH's Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Branch. "She exemplifies the work of public health in its finest sense."

Getting physically active is one component of the Live Healthy Georgia campaign launched in the spring of 2005 by DHR in partnership with Gov. Sonny Perdue. The campaign promotes five guidelines for healthier living and well-being: *Be Active, Eat Healthy, Be Smoke-Free, Get Checked and Be Positive.*

Pilgrim says "making healthy lifestyle choices, such as adding 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity to your daily routine, can significantly lower your risk of various chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease."

Here are some ways you and your family can get moving for better health: Take a hike along a neighborhood walking or nature trail; jump rope; go for a bike ride; contact your local health department for information about physical activities planned in your community. To learn more about how you and your loved ones can live healthier or be more physically active visit <http://www.livehealthygeorgia.org>.

Snapshots from Katrina



(l-r) Immunization Program Consultants **Jan Slaughter, Angie Webster** and **Angela Bumphus** search for immunization records so evacuees' children can start school.

