



A SYMPHONY of EFFORT

By Katie K. Bell

New Orleans, La.—Neighborhoods were flooded and evacuated as a result of floods caused by Hurricane Katrina. Photo by Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA

Cobb's family of businesses, non-profits and government agencies pull together to make a difference for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

When a hurricane-weary mother with a set of premature twins arrived from New Orleans at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, staff members performing initial health assessments contacted Lisa Crossman at Cobb Public Health. The mother desperately needed formula for her babies. Crossman made a phone call to her contacts at WellStar Kennestone Hospital, which in turn yielded cases of formula, sterilized bottles and nipples. A few bibs and blankets were thrown in along with a pair of slippers for the mother. "Within a half an hour we had those babies drinking formula. Because of the strength of our daily relationship with WellStar we could pull this together in no time," says Crossman.

Crossman also credits Pam Blackwell, director of Emergency Preparedness for Cobb Public Health, the staff at Dobbins and several Cobb ambulance companies (Puckett EMS and Metro Atlanta Ambulance) for getting those in greatest need to hospitals, nursing homes and shelters. As Blackwell notes, "The community and county responses were absolutely incredible." Discussing reasons for the success of Cobb's relief efforts she

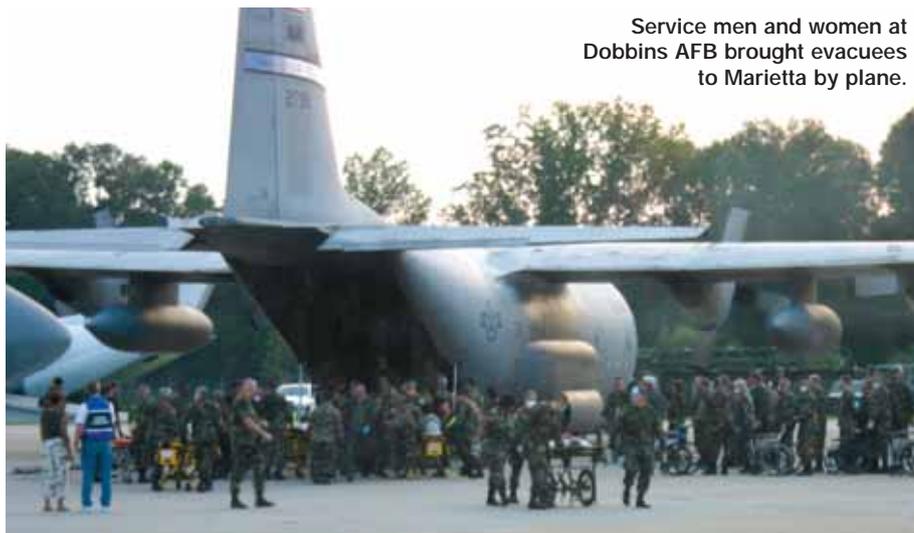
explains, "It really is all about strong partnerships; working with them [partners] every day, knowing the resources they have to offer, having a level of trust and a clear mission to give care to those people who lost everything." Many in the Cobb business community credit Leadership Cobb and other programs sponsored by the Cobb Chamber of Commerce for developing and strengthening the very partnerships that Blackwell mentions; connections that ultimately had a positive influence on the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

John Moeller of MUST Ministries, one of Georgia's largest faith-based social service providers, describes the first days after Katrina: "The numbers were (and still are) staggering," he says. "Yet, what has been equally incredible is how this community has rallied." MUST Ministries typically serves meals to about 80 families a day, but post-Katrina demands require them to serve 500-600 families a day. When the team at MUST Ministries took note of the Katrina situation, they immediately decided to put out an all points bulletin for food and supplies for what they determined would be a mass exodus from New Orleans to Atlanta.



Emergency service personnel at Dobbins ARB rush a Katrina evacuee to care.

Service men and women at Dobbins AFB brought evacuees to Marietta by plane.



Daily Journal used her contacts to get in touch with FEMA, and Captain Sean King at NAS [Naval Air Station Atlanta] got in touch with his sources. Working together we all arranged to get Marlene's family and the young boys airlifted out of New Orleans," explains Cohen.

Once rescued (all 30 of them), Kim Gresch, owner of SA White Oil, arranged for free gas on the way back. While Cohen and crew drove back to Atlanta, the Cobb YWCA and several area churches worked furiously to renovate and furnish three transitional homes. "Within 24 hours the community got these homes ready to go," says Cohen. In addition, the Marietta Conference Center donated 12 rooms to the evacuees. "The community has been amazing. Non-profits, businesses and government agencies all worked together to make things happen. We are the model for how it should be done."

In an effort to process newly arrived evacuees with efficient one-stop assistance, Life University partnered with the Red Cross to open a Red Cross Disaster Recovery MegaCenter. Providing services from the American Red Cross, Department of Human Resources,

"We received food by the boatload. WellStar Health System's 10,000 employees did a food drive, Lockheed did one, civic groups and churches all pulled together to bring us food," Moeller explains.

MUST Ministries received more food in a three day period than they have received in four months. There was so much food that the staff became concerned about storage and distribution. "Our biggest contribution came from Cobb EMC. They set aside a warehouse for us that is now serving as a drop-off and distribution center. Without it we would have had to turn the food away for lack of storage and space," says Moeller.

"We were able to provide 36,000 meals over an eight-day period all because of the response of the Cobb community."

The Cobb community also came to the aid of InfoMart President Tammy Cohen during her hands-on rescue effort in New Orleans. The rescue itself is the gold standard for how businesses, individuals and community members can pull together to make a difference. "One of my employees, Marlene [Murphy], came to me and said her sister and several friends were trapped in New Orleans. They worked at a boy's home, and many boys were stuck there too. There were 30 people all together

and there was no way to get them out," says Cohen. Hours later Cohen rented three vans and headed to New Orleans to rescue 30 people she'd never met.

According to Cohen, gas was hard to find, but navigating the maze of military barricades became the most challenging. Using connections in Cobb County, the InfoMart team was able to get into the city. "We enrolled the help of others here in Cobb. Congressman [Phil] Gingrey helped us in working with the Coast Guard, Kimberley Starks at the *Marietta*



Search and rescue teams look for survivors.

Photo by: Liz Roll

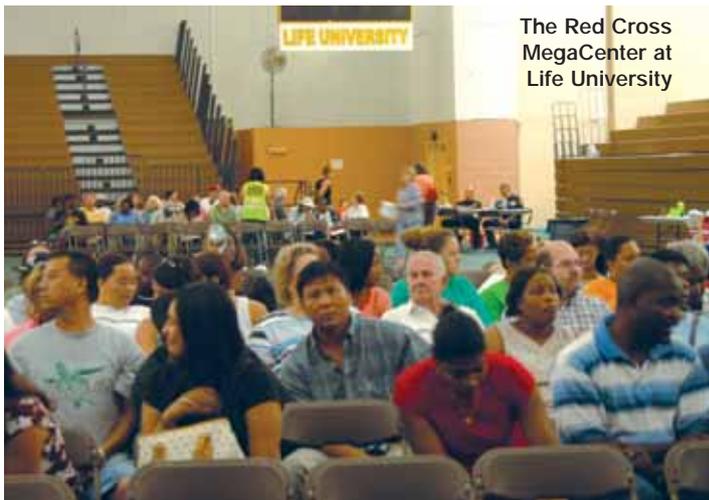
Department of Community Affairs, Department of Driver Services, Department of Education, Department of Labor and other state agencies, as well as the Atlanta Council for Aging, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Social Security Administration, evacuees were able to manage most of their affairs in one visit.

Wachovia employees provided additional support, helping the Red Cross serve more than 17,000 families and distribute more than \$17 million in financial aid. Numerous Wachovia employees staffed the MegaCenter at Life University to hand-write money orders, distribute special American Express checks and help coordinate bus transportation to and from select Wachovia branches so the evacuees could cash checks and open accounts.

"The center had a waiting

area where people are given food and drinks along with a separate area for kids to play while their parents took care of business,” explains Heidi Wheatley, director of marketing and communications for Life University. To date the number of cases (families) served at Life University totals more than 8,000, providing more than \$11 million in assistance.

The added support from the Life community was remarkable. “We coordinated efforts with the Red Cross providing security, staff and students,” explains Wheatley. “The human aspect made this center move more smoothly; students jumped in to take care of them,” she says. Indeed, on the hottest days when the evacuees were waiting in line, Life students loaded up golf carts and headed out with Gatorade, chairs and tents to give relief from the heat. “We treated them as our guests. That’s how we approached it,” says Wheatley.



The Red Cross
MegaCenter at
Life University

The MUST Ministries warehouse had 50 to 100 volunteers a day sorting and packing food orders, which are taken all over the community. Yet, the future is uncertain. Moeller admits, “We basically have new residents in Cobb and Atlanta. At least seven out of 10 evacuees we talk to tell us they plan to stay. This is clearly an unfolding crisis of need.” the potential and present strain on resources, Moeller is serious about reminding the community to continue to donate food,

money and services. “We’re hunkering down for the long term, we want people to realize we have an added responsibility to our new neighbors and we are going to continue to need financial support from the community to maintain this level of service,” he explains.

Working together like a symphony orchestra, the people of Cobb County and its many resources brought aid to the victims of Hurricane Katrina in the most personal of ways. Whether it was bankers writing out hundreds of money orders for the Red Cross, or business owners coordinating hands-on, personal rescues of trapped family members, Cobb County’s finest made a difference. Yet, the needs of the poor and jobless remain, which is all the more reason for Cobb’s amazing network of businesses and resources to continue to pull together to make it such a wonderful place to live. ■