

Amerigroup Disaster Response Team: Inaugural Deployment, September 2008

Collin Elane remembers the small, anxious woman in her 70s struggling to care for her 6-foot, 10-inch husband who had Alzheimer’s disease.

Gerry Stoner remembers the young man with diabetes stranded hundreds of miles from home without insulin or a prescription.

Jayne Forbes remembers the elderly woman on a walker who was so determined to help out in her shelter that she mopped the floor at 4 a.m.

For the Amerigroup Disaster Response Team, these were the faces of a first encounter with a hurricane. When two groups of Amerigroup associates were dispatched from corporate headquarters in Virginia Beach, Va., to help people coping with two separate hurricanes in early September 2008, they were entering unfamiliar territory. This was the team’s first deployment since Amerigroup chairman and chief executive officer Jim Carlson proposed the idea early in 2008.

The needs that Disaster Response Team members confronted and the work they did differed dramatically, but every situation had a common thread. “We got to see the faces of the people we were helping,” said Collin, a nurse and director of clinical operations for Amerigroup. “It was physically exhausting. But it was emotionally rewarding.”

As many Americans returned to work from their Labor Day holiday, large portions of the southeastern United States were preparing for natural disaster. Hurricane Gustav, an extremely powerful storm, was bearing down on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. At the same time, what had become Tropical Storm Hanna was threatening to strike the Eastern Seaboard, anywhere from Florida north to the Carolinas.

On Thursday of that week, two groups of Amerigroup associates set out to address the impact of both storms. One went to Memphis, Tenn., where thousands of New Orleans residents who had been



evacuated ahead of Gustav were staying in makeshift shelters. The other went to Savannah, Ga., where authorities were preparing for Hanna.

This outreach had been months in the making. The Disaster Response Team was launched in January 2008, when Jim addressed Amerigroup managers about the year ahead. “I have always been struck by the way our associates step up whenever there is a natural or man-made disaster,” he said. “In fact, I brag about it whenever I am given the chance.

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“The Disaster Response Team will give us an opportunity to formalize what has been a grassroots initiative. The specific focus of our efforts will be to assist people with disabilities who are especially vulnerable in the face of natural disasters.”

As Jim predicted, many Amerigroup associates quickly volunteered to participate. To get the program off to a strong start, a small core of people who had previously participated in volunteer response or disaster-relief efforts were identified and given Red Cross training. When Hanna and Gustav simultaneously appeared, Amerigroup reached out to local Red Cross chapters in places feeling the storms’ effects.

One team – which included Collin; Jayne, assistant vice president of finance; Gerry, assistant vice president and privacy officer; and Robert Spadaccini, director of provider operations – flew to Memphis.

The other – which included Deborah Lee, assistant vice president of product planning; Kerry Sutton, vice president of account management; and Cynthia Caddle, testing analyst – flew to Savannah.

The Memphis team arrived in the middle of an emergency. Spurred by memories of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, tens of thousands of New Orleans residents had temporarily fled their homes and headed north. For many who wanted to leave but had no transportation, the city arranged a train to Memphis. There, more than 20 shelters in schools and community centers housed more than 3,000 people.

Members of the Amerigroup Memphis team were immediately assigned to work at rotating shelters, often on the night shift, taking on whatever task was needed most. The shelters were usually gymnasiums filled with dozens of cots, and many of the evacuees had arrived with little more than the clothes they wore. Making sure people had food, clothes, medicine and showers was a round-the-clock task. Giving them emotional support was even more demanding.

“People like to tell you their story,” Jayne said. “They wanted to talk about the storm. They wanted to talk about their homes. There was so much they had on their minds, and



Disaster Response Team member Collin Elane during a late-night shift at a Memphis community center

they just wanted someone to listen.”

The Savannah team arrived ahead of Hanna and carried out a very different task. They worked side by side with local Red Cross professionals to pre-position materials and supplies used for disaster response. Even though Hanna caused minimal damage, Savannah’s Red Cross is often called on when hurricanes strike Florida or other nearby states. The work done by Amerigroup associates on the Savannah team will pay off when other storms inevitably arrive.



Team member Jayne Forbes pauses while assisting the evacuees returning home from Memphis

“We put in long days, and we were able to help some of the local folks stay fresh, not knowing when they would be needed,” Deborah said. “We were happy to help get the job done, and they made it clear the work was appreciated.”

Whatever their duties, the members of the Amerigroup Disaster Response Team agreed that the work was its own reward. “It was satisfying just to go down there and do something,” Gerry said. “When you told people that you worked for a company that supports this kind of effort, they were really impressed. But knowing you made a difference, that’s what really makes it worth it.”