

CMR 442

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Dear Jayne,

I'm looking forward to the days of training we have coming up later this month. It sounds like it will be a great conference!

I had an interesting experience volunteering for the first time with the American Red Cross a few months ago. My friend, Jane Santos, recommended that I write to you about it.

After the news of the devastation on the Gulf coast, I wished that I could help in some way. I had not been busy with any adoption cases for awhile, and I had taken disaster mental health training in Maryland several years ago. When I received a message from NASW that licensed social workers were urgently needed to assist in the response to Hurricane Katrina, I contacted our local American Red Cross office here in Heidelberg. The director assisted me in applying with my resume via fax, and provided me with additional training in disaster mental health and first aid. Some weeks passed and finally I received my assignment via email; I was asked to report as soon as possible to the ARC national headquarters in Washington, D.C. I left at the end of October, and my assignment was for three weeks.

It was surprising to me how easy everything was made for the volunteers. For example, my air fare, a room of my own and breakfast at a comfortable hotel, daily shuttle service, lunches and snacks; and even a credit card on which we could charge up to \$700 in case of some extraordinary expenses related to our work or travel – all was provided. I had envisioned roughing it somewhere in a shelter! When I explained at headquarters that I was a social worker, they assigned me to the ARC National Call Center in nearby Falls Church, Virginia. The Call Center was a modern 5-story building with a number of permanent employees and about 100 volunteers at any given time; volunteers were arriving and leaving daily. People in the hard-hit areas were encouraged to call us at 1-800-GET INFO, and while I was there over 900,000 calls had already come in from the hurricanes. New volunteers were trained to use a special computer

program which provided instant information about local resources, such as shelters, food and water, medical care, and community mental health centers. If a caller said that their home had been totally destroyed by a hurricane, a case was written and passed on to the volunteers in charge of sending emergency financial assistance; of course, we referred them to FEMA, as well. We worked in shifts, morning, afternoon, and evening; I always worked the 7am to 3pm shift. There were usually several of us working together, therapists, social workers, and psychologists. Our supervisor, Mr. O'Neal, was a Red Cross veteran, very kindly and supportive.

Most of the volunteers worked hard all during their shifts, rapidly taking one phone call after another. Registered nurses were on hand for calls regarding medical matters, and we mental health workers were requested to assist when callers were especially distraught or had other mental health issues. We had no time urgency and were able to spend as much time as needed with each caller. After being trained, I spent some time shadowing other mental health workers before taking calls myself. As I listened to the stories of trauma, loss and grief, I felt shocked to hear about so much suffering; some of the stories were horrible. Sometimes, while I was listening and calming the caller, the agent would be looking for the needed resources. We were not identified as "mental health workers," but just as other volunteers.

Another role we had was in providing support to the regular call agents. After working on a call together, I would go out to visit the call agent to thank and encourage them. I also walked around with other mental health workers occasionally, distributing cheery, morale-building notes and chocolates. We also did exit interviews, giving the call agents a chance to talk about their feelings and experiences as they prepared to go home.

I know there is value in just listening and being empathetic, but I was glad when sometimes we really helped a caller find a possible solution to the urgent problem at hand. Some callers were very grateful to us for being there, trying to help. Each day after our morning meeting, Mr. O'Neal would smile and say, "Go and do good." During the weeks I was there, he told us that we were able to avert two suicides and one homicide. When I left, I received a positive written evaluation, three Red Cross pins, and a certificate of appreciation.

It was a pleasure to meet many other volunteers; and of course, on my days off, to visit some of the national monuments and museums of Washington, D.C. After my assignment was done, I had a chance to attend some professional training in nearby Bethesda, and to visit some friends in Frederick, my former home. All in all my experience as a Red Cross volunteer was deeply satisfying. I was happy to have the opportunity to serve. On returning to Heidelberg, I stopped by the local ARC office and told the new director there about it.

I look forward to seeing you soon at the training!

Sincerely,

*Monica Greene*