

NARA is 'first preserver' in hurricanes' aftermath

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which recently struck the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Alabama, have devastated the lives of millions of Americans who lost loved ones, homes, and jobs. Also at risk for victims of Katrina and Rita are records that document the individual and collective memories of this region—"identity loss."

Imperiled were (and still are) records such as property deeds, birth certificates, and personal papers, as well as records documenting rights and entitlements, such as Social Security and veterans' benefits—all crucial in the recovery and rebuilding processes.

Also at risk are records that document the routine operation of the Federal government—the actions of regional offices of departments and agencies and Federal courts in those areas—as well as records of state and local governments.

As "first preserver" of such documents, it is the job of the National Archives and Records Administration to help assess, recover, and preserve these irreplaceable records. NARA staff has already spent the post-hurricanes weeks working with Federal agencies and our partners in state and local government to begin to identify and recover records. We have sent both financial resources and staff from around the country to the affected areas and will continue to do so as long as needed.

Here are some of the things the National Archives has done to date:

- Two conservators from College Park have held training sessions in Jackson, MS, for state and local officials who will be dealing with damaged or contaminated documents. NARA conservators also gave a workshop at Archives II for FBI officials concerning options for drying frozen records and mold issues. Our experts will also provide these sessions in other affected locations when possible.

- Two staff members from the Southeast Region (Atlanta) visited Keesler Air Force Base near Biloxi, MS, and regional offices of several other Federal agencies. There, they assessed damage to records and offered advice and assistance on records recovery. Staff in Atlanta and in the Southwest Region (Fort Worth) are poised to travel to the Gulf Coast, when they are allowed to do so, to assist in assessing damage and recovering



damaged and/or contaminated records.

- The National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis has provided expedited service to hurricane-related requests from veterans and retired civil servants who

need documents from their personnel files so they can establish or re-establish their identities.

- A special section on the www.archives.gov web site lists agency contacts and provides links to information on records recovery and preservation for Federal agencies and courts, state and local governments, cultural institutions, and the general public.

- The National Archives is working closely with the appropriate Federal authorities to secure representation on teams of Federal officials that evaluate damaged buildings to determine the nature of records damage and what type of assistance from NARA will be needed.

- The National Archives has authorized Federal agencies to destroy contaminated records that represent a risk to health, life, or property if those records have a temporary disposition of 10 years or less and if the information in them is likely captured, at least in part, in other sources.

Because we also have a professional responsibility to ensure the preservation of non-Federal historical records that tell the story of America, I have taken several actions in my capacity as chairman of NARA's National Historical Records and Publications Commission (NHPRC).

Emergency grants of up to \$25,000 from NHPRC's fiscal year 2005 funds have been authorized for the state archives in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama for disaster assessment and response activities. Additional grants in each state of up to \$100,000 from FY 2006 funds will be considered as soon as those funds are appropriated. NHPRC is working closely with the Council of State Archivists and the Society of American Archivists to identify other funds and sources of support.

Individual units and individual staff members at the National Archives have also

stepped forward to offer assistance. When the Federal Emergency Management Agency sent out a call for Federal employees to volunteer their services for a month in the hurricane-damaged region, quite a few staff members applied.

In Chicago, several NARA employees from the Great Lakes Region helped staff a FEMA satellite teleregistration center to receive applications for Federal disaster assistance from victims of Hurricane Katrina.

At the Federal Register, editors recently stopped the presses to add publication of an important Treasury Department ruling that allowed financial institutions to cash Government assistance checks for Hurricane Katrina victims without requiring identification, which in many cases had been lost.

Foundations and institutes affiliated with the Presidential libraries have contributed nearly \$83,000 to a special fund to aid Katrina victims.

In the aftermath of the unprecedented damage to a large part of the Gulf Coast region, we are learning once again the vital importance of access to records, not only to governments and institutions but also to individuals and families. For our part, the National Archives will work diligently to fulfill its mission to provide expertise in the areas of records management, recovery, and preservation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

*This column originally appeared
in the October 2005 issue
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*