

“CAN I REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?”



FEMA volunteer Fred Cyran (LMSB Engineering Team 1842) at the Hurricane Rita Mobile Disaster Relief Center in Port Arthur, TX, October 2005

This is the third in a series of real-life experiences from LMSB engineers that volunteered to assist FEMA with last years' hurricane relief. This story was contributed by Fred Cyran, LMSB

Special points of interest:

- FEMA volunteer Fred Cyran tells his story.
- Engineers attend AAPG Convention in Houston.
- Expert witness testimony helps government case stand.
- Information about marine appraisals.

What kind of a bureaucrat am I? Can I really make a difference?

Another normal long and stressful day at the Port Arthur TX mobile disaster relief center - long lines of evacuees in our tent needing our help to correct data input problems that froze their FEMA assistance checks. At the end of one of these, my group leader referred a special situation to me for assistance and counseling. An extended family group evacuated Hurricane Rita and went to a shelter in Louisiana. In this family, a young woman, around 21 years old, was 7-8 months pregnant. She had a problem pregnancy before the evacuation and needed special pre-natal care. Her doctor evacuated to some other place and her pre-natal care facility was closed for the evacuation. At the shelter in Louisiana she started having serious pregnancy-related problems—but the storm hit them hard at the shelter in Louisiana, and there were no facilities in the area that could handle her special needs. So the family drove a couple of hours away to another shelter in Houston. By the time they arrived there, her condition was very serious, and she was taken to a hospital to handle a life-or-death delivery. The baby was delivered by C-section and put into intensive care. The infant was born at 32 weeks and had congenital difficulties. The rest of the family found a shelter in Houston. The mother only got to hold the baby once, and the baby died at the age of 20 days, just 3 days prior to being referred to me. Just the day before they came to see us, the family had come home to Port Arthur for the first time since the evacuation. They found their home with extensive hurricane damage and with mold everywhere. They could only live in part of the house. The nearby house of another family of their relatives was not livable, and this other family had to move in with their extended family. But at the time, they had no other choice but to live there. They had no insurance, no money, and no place to bury the baby. They started to make funeral arrangements, and needed help from FEMA for funeral expenses.

I was all alone in the corner of the relief center tent surrounded by eight family members and the bereaved mother, all of them looking at me with pleading in their eyes that non-verbally communicated "Can you help us, Mr. Civil Servant?" The mother was numb from emotional shock, but the grandmother was in charge and rational. I thought about how I would feel if I were in their situation and some bureaucrat said to me "Sorry, we are about to close, come back tomorrow." I had volunteered to come down here to help people and make a difference in their lives. Somebody needed to help these people. Now, I am that that somebody. I was terrified about how to help them, and about what to say to them. I'm an engineer by profession, not a social worker. The last thing these people needed was bureaucratic incompetence. An old saying I once heard came to my mind: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

Fortunately I had some lay-ministerial experience from years ago. I felt compassion for this family. They were holding up surprisingly well under the circumstances. I had to give them special attention and counseling for such a sensitive and tragic situation. I made some calls and found out what needed to be done to reimburse their funeral home. I didn't know how to handle this. None of my coworkers or my leader knew how to handle this. Nobody at my central command center in Austin TX, where I call to elevate problems for special assistance, knew how to handle this. I had no decision making authority, and neither did anyone else here at this relief center. All I could do was to provide advice on dealing with the FEMA assistance system. After about an hour on the cell phone, with members of this family watching me and hoping for a solution, I was told by the central command center that my matter will be referred to another unknown specialist at some remote location, and I would need to contact them tomorrow. We were closing the center down for the night, but at least there is some hope that things will work out very soon. I did all I could do for this family today. I decided to give them my personal cell phone number so they can call me anytime, even later that evening, if they need my help. They need to come back to me in the morning and I will complete the paperwork to get this expedited.

To make matters worse, as I walked the family out of the tent, the grandmother told me she had been approached by a person in her neighborhood claiming to be a FEMA inspector. This person asked them for their social security number and did not show them any credentials. After I questioned her more about this incident, it appeared that she was the victim of a FEMA imposter. (She was in so much shock with the funeral that she gave out her social security number and other personal identity information when asked by the person). We were alerted to the possible presence of such an imposter a couple of hours earlier that very day. This is a criminal act, which I reported to my leader, who then notified the central command center for further investigation

To summarize the end of the story, the family returned the next day (a Saturday) and I figured out what the problem was after a lengthy discussion with a specialist referred from the central command center. For them to get funeral assistance, they needed to have some sort of official documentation that the baby's death was related to the hurricane. Knowing this, I was able to advise them to track down the doctor at the hospital in Houston and have him sign an affidavit about all the circumstances of the baby's death. Then the application for assistance could be processed. They asked me to explain this procedure to their funeral home (they had concerns about payment for the funeral), which I did. I also made other related calls and assisted them with the proper procedures to follow to process the application. Now the fate of their application rests in the hands of a massive, intangible, government computer software program.

Because of confidentiality, my interaction with this family would normally have ended here. But notice of the baby's funeral was published in the local newspaper. Since I was able to obtain the location of the funeral home from a public source, I decided to attend the funeral. The next day was Sunday, the day of the funeral, and the disaster center was closed (my only day of the week off). I showed up at the funeral in my white shirt and tie, without my FEMA uniform. More eyes focused on me. Do real bureaucrats cry? Do they do things only according to a set of rigid procedures? Do they think about their influence on those they serve? The mother and grandmother asked me to speak a few words of comfort during the funeral service. I accepted their request with honor. I can't forget the expression of gratitude I received from this family for the little bit of help I gave them. What kind of a bureaucrat am I anyway? It doesn't matter to me, but it mattered to these people. I got to see where my efforts really matter. Yes, I really did make a difference, and I have the satisfaction of knowing I treated them the way I would want to be treated.



FEMA Mobile Disaster Relief Center at the damaged civic center in Port Arthur, TX, October 2005

Photos courtesy of Fred Cyran.