

Higher Ground

The Dedication of Direct Support Professionals
During and After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The Disaster

On August 29, 2005 at 7:30 a.m., Hurricane Katrina struck the City of New Orleans. The hurricane and ensuing flood directly effected every Direct Support Professional (DSP) in New Orleans and all who received their services.

This report is devoted to describing the dedication of the DSPs that continuously supported individuals with disabilities throughout the disaster and its aftermath. These stories, told by DSPs who worked for Volunteers of America (VOA) of Greater New Orleans, provide rich descriptions of why they continued to work at VOA throughout the Katrina and Rita experiences. By far, the most common reasons DSPs reported staying with VOA were because they liked the people they supported and they felt that the people they supported liked, appreciated, and needed them.

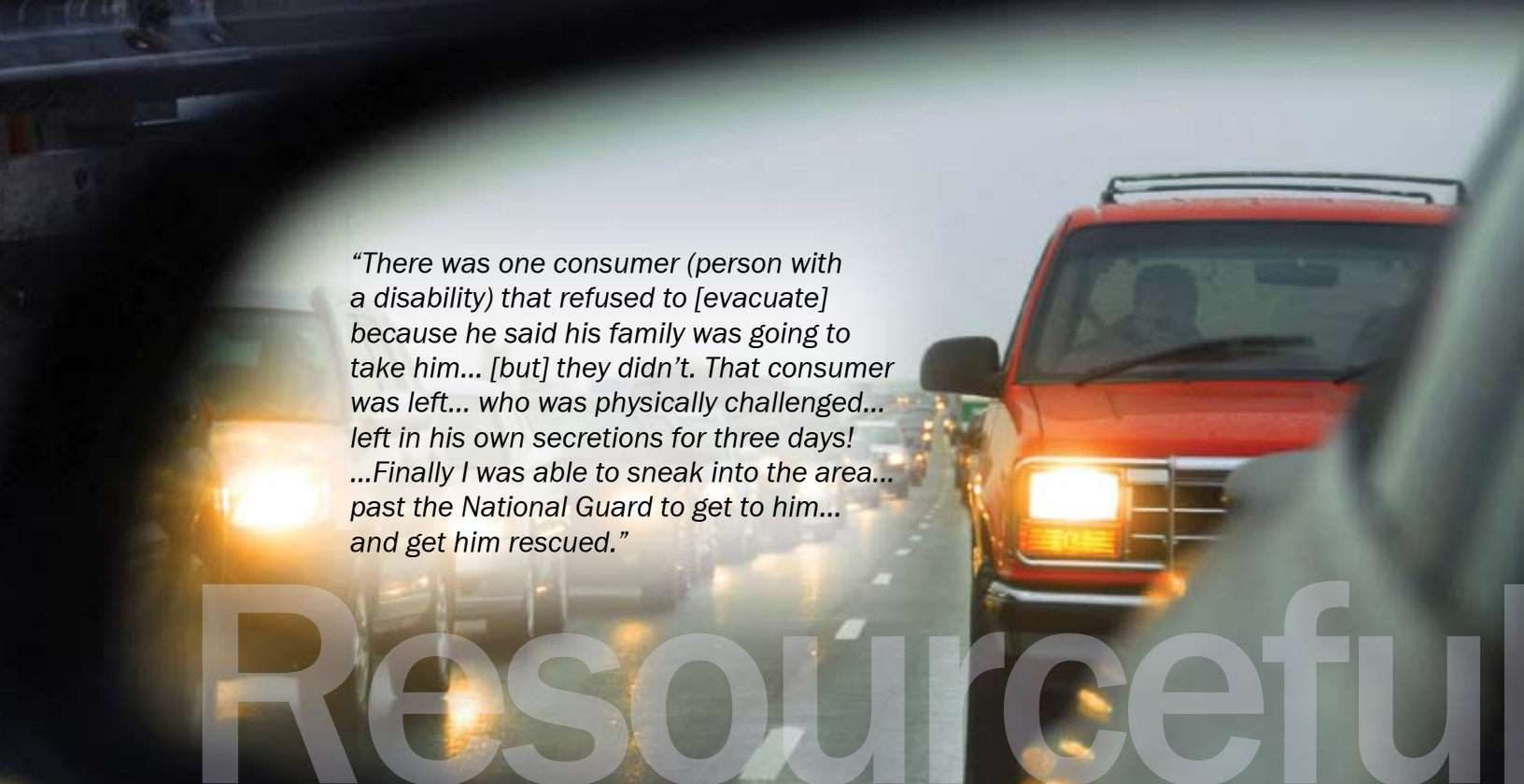
Katrina DSPs demonstrated dedication, conviction to their profession, generosity, compassion, commitment, and an unwavering respect and love for the people with disabilities they supported. The personal stories of Carol, Lori, Keyoka and Burnell further exemplify their dedication to their profession, and willingness to go above and beyond their typical responsibilities to ensure the safety, continuity of support, and well-being of the people with disabilities they supported. All of these stories illustrate, without question, the value and importance of people who choose direct support as their profession.

"We stayed because...I stayed... and I could probably speak for everybody here... because of the [people we supported]... I mean we had 72 consumers. If everybody had left I don't know who would have helped them."



Skilful

"Katrina DSPs demonstrated dedication, conviction to their profession, generosity, compassion, commitment, and an unwavering respect and love for the people with disabilities to whom they provided support."



"There was one consumer (person with a disability) that refused to [evacuate] because he said his family was going to take him... [but] they didn't. That consumer was left... who was physically challenged... left in his own secretions for three days! ...Finally I was able to sneak into the area... past the National Guard to get to him... and get him rescued."

Resourceful

The Dedication

The dedication demonstrated by DSPs before, during, and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was evident through their actions and attitudes; both of which enhanced the lives of the people they supported. DSPs generously gave of their personal time to fill the numerous uncovered work hours resulting in time away from their own families, time away from the rebuilding efforts in their own homes, and time away from their own health maintenance and emotional recovery needs. DSPs frequently worked around the clock in the early days after Hurricane Katrina and continued a grueling work pace for the year following the disaster.

In addition to their time, DSPs dedicated many of their own resources to VOA and the people they supported. DSPs told the same story over and over of how they packed three days of clothes and personal supplies for themselves, family members, and the people they supported. When it was clear that the evacuation would be in effect for a much longer period of time while the city and VOA rebuilt, DSPs provided supported living services, purchased food, clothing, and supplies for individuals receiving support on an ongoing basis. Some of the DSPs kept receipts and were reimbursed by VOA, others just absorbed the expenses. For many, cash was not available, so interest on credit cards was also incurred.

Some DSPs relied heavily upon their families to support individuals with disabilities throughout the disaster. This often took the form of sharing living space and on occasion included soliciting family members to perform DSP duties such as bathing, feeding, and providing community support. The dedication demonstrated by DSPs before, during, and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was evident through their actions and attitudes; both of which enhanced the lives of the people they supported.



"When they were able to go back to look at their homes... The [DSPs] came back [to support individuals] not because of the money, because the money is not even worth it. It's because of the dedication to the [people we support]... and half of us been here... we've been here for years... over ten years... most of the staff (DSPs) that's here."

Unwavering



The Commitment to the Individuals Served

It was their commitment to the individuals that they served that kept Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) working throughout the disaster and return to the Greater New Orleans area. DSPs routinely stated that the people they supported were like their own family. Many DSPs talked about having provided support to the individuals they supported for very long periods of time; sometimes over a decade of service. DSPs had individuals with disabilities living with them, staying with them on holidays, being in their weddings, and evolving into friends over time. The DSPs that continued to stay with VOA in New Orleans and support individuals with disabilities did so because of their deep and profound commitment to those individuals.

While each relationship between a DSP and the person they supported was a testimony to the amazing qualities of these DSPs, one story in particular conveys the emotion, love and dedication common among this group of professionals. Phalon told of his relationship with Chad, who he supported for twenty years. They were roommates in college together, Chad was the best man in the Phalon's wedding, and they loved each other deeply as best friends. As a secondary result of the hurricane, Chad died due to complications of pneumonia. Phalon never left his side. Although hospital staff was available to perform Chad's personal care duties — Phalon insisted that he give his friend his last bath. It was the act of a family member. Theirs was a deep friendship, the kind that can not be described in words and one that was born out of direct support. "I have been working with that man since 1986, he was like a family member to me and it is difficult to lose him."

Carol worked as a DSP and frontline supervisor for nearly twenty years when Hurricane Katrina hit. Carol reported that her faith was tested by this disaster, but never her commitment to the DSPs she worked with or the individuals with disabilities that they supported. Carol supervised 33 DSPs before Katrina hit; twelve came back but then three left for better paying jobs. During the evacuation she took one of the people she supported and evacuated him with her family. The individual receiving support was a six-foot seven, 250-pound man who used a wheelchair. The available room in Carol's vehicle was devoted to the equipment and supplies she needed to support this person. She and her husband left their belongings behind to accommodate his needs. During the evacuation, Carol, her husband, and the individual receiving support shared a single, inaccessible, hotel



room where they provided 24-hour support to this man. Eventually, Carol was unable to continue supporting him due to the physical demands of that support. She was able to work with VOA to locate accessible housing for him in Baton Rouge. Carol and her husband lost their own home and everything they had accumulated over their lifetime. "Young people can rebuild, but my body is wearing out. We wouldn't wish this on anyone."

Compassionate

"She (individual receiving support) needs more clothes, 'cause the clothes... everybody meddled with her outfits... so what she had was what I purchased out of my own money that I'm working for. So, ok what do we do here? 'Cause you know at this point I am starting to get aggravated. ...winter is in full bloom here in Shreveport, [and it's colder than] New Orleans. ...So I am buying jackets... I am buying for my kids... but at this point I am feeling like she (individual receiving support) is one of my kids 'cause I am providing [for her]."

"The other consumer (individual receiving support) that I took with me, I wasn't working with at all. He just popped up at my house and said can I go with you?... with two dollars in his pocket and that was it, [just] his clothes on his back. [I] probably could have taken him to a shelter [but] he didn't want a shelter. So I took him also... knowing that I wasn't going to get paid for [supporting] him...from VOA".

"Oh, now that was the hardest part because I had six individuals [with disabilities] that I didn't know anything about... didn't have most of their information... it was lost. Now getting back to the group home where I work... 'Come back staff... quick... 'cause I'll be short handed!' [Now] I had twelve individuals [to support]. I worked by myself to take care of all their needs and I did that for a week after I started, 'cause there was no help. That was the hardest part and the hardest part still."



Lori had worked for eleven years as a DSP at the time that she evacuated with her three- and fourteen-year-old children. She evacuated to the Superdome where her fourteen-year-old was lost for a period of time in the chaos and violence. Lori later connected with VOA DSPs and individuals receiving support who had evacuated to a retreat center in Palestine, Texas. While many DSPs and their family members lived for an extended period of time in Palestine, Lori and her children decided that she would stay in Palestine to provide support to people with disabilities who were unable to return to their homes in New Orleans. Lori made arrangements for her children to live with her sister in North Carolina. Shortly thereafter, Lori's sister died suddenly. Although devastated by her personal loss, Lori settled her children with other family members and returned to Palestine to continue supporting individuals with disabilities. "If I left [the individuals receiving support], then what would have happened [to them]."



The Added Responsibilities

VOA DSPs demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to take on added responsibility and burden during the evacuation process and over the year following the hurricanes. At times, DSPs put themselves in harms way in order to provide support to people with disabilities. In many cases the added responsibility included providing support to individuals that they didn't know. Other people with disabilities from VOA who needed support were brought to them because they had no where else to go. Other situations called upon (and continue to call upon) DSPs to provide support for more individuals than seemed humanly possible. Group homes have doubled in size and yet staffing shortages have forced staffing patterns to remain at or lower than pre-hurricane levels. DSPs were called upon to help individuals with disabilities to salvage their belongings (if possible), re-establish housing, gut houses and apartments, clean mold, hire contractors, apply for FEMA benefits, etc. Each of these duties went above and beyond their normal direct support work responsibilities.



"It is not so much VOA that you are dedicated to, it is the people. I have children that were saying, 'Mama come live in Ohio. Mama come live in Mississippi. Mama come live in Georgia.' You can't give up part of your family (the people you support)... they depend on me. You have to help them get through this."

"I left [the New Orleans area] with the job because I have been with them for 15 years and I am dedicated to my clients (people with disabilities), like became my family."

Keyoka and Burnell are a married couple who provide direct support services to people with disabilities in New Orleans. At the time of the Katrina evacuation Keyoka had worked for VOA for over eight years while Burnell had worked for VOA for four years. They evacuated together in two vehicles along with their two children and six individuals receiving support. Their evacuation led them to Houston, Texas where they met other DSPs and individuals with disabilities receiving support at an unoccupied substance abuse rehabilitation house operated by Houston VOA. This communal living situation consisted of four DSPs (including Keyoke and Burnell), six children of DSPs, and twelve people with disabilities. When Hurricane Rita threatened the Houston area, the entire group had to evacuate once again; this time to Shreveport, Louisiana. The evacuation process was traumatizing as they sat for days on congested highways without the ability to stop for food, water or



bathrooms. They were unable to pull off the road for fear that people would block them and prevent them from getting back on the highway. Keyoke fell asleep while driving after many hours and ran into the back of Burnell's vehicle. "I don't like to take long driving trips anymore." Together Keyoka and Burnell continue to provide services to people with disabilities and, at the time of their interview, still had one individual receiving support living with them in their new home.



The Project

In May 2006, a series of five focus groups with 41 participants and six individual interviews were used to glean information from DSPs, frontline supervisors, and administrators about their experiences throughout the 2005 Katrina storm, flood, and evacuation. Information about their return from the evacuation back to the New Orleans area and to their jobs at VOA was also gathered. A brief survey was used to gather demographic information about focus group participants and to get answers to a core set of questions about their experiences.

For additional detail about the experiences of DSPs in the Hurricane Katrina and Rita disasters, please access — LaLiberte, T., Hewitt, A., Lande, J.H., & Larson, S.A. (2007).

You know that it's got to be dedication that I am still here: The experiences of direct support professionals during hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the aftermath. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living.

<http://rtc.umn.edu/docs/nolafinalreport.pdf>

Smith, J. (Producer/Director) (2007). "Higher ground: The dedication of direct support professionals during and after hurricanes Katrina and Rita" [Motion Picture]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living.

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To purchase the video "Higher Ground," visit —

rtcmedia.umn.edu

www.voa.org/OurServices/DevelopmentalDisability



This publication is dedicated to the Direct Support Professionals who took time to share their personal experiences with the authors. We have a deep sense of respect for the commitment and sacrifice demonstrated by all of those involved in this project.

