

THE WASHINGTON THAT FEMA FORGOT

No power. No water. No help at all from the U.S. government. So the people of Washington Parish figured out how to get help themselves.

By JOHN HELYAR
October 3, 2005

(FORTUNE Magazine) – Out of chaos sometimes comes inspiration. Consider what happened after the ill winds of Katrina had their way with New Orleans and came ripping through rural Washington Parish, La., at 150 miles per hour. The people of Washington Parish--a 670-square-mile expanse northeast of the city--knew they'd feel the pain. Parish president Toye Taylor was holed up in an emergency-ops center three miles outside Bogalusa. As the storm raged, a branch crashed through the roof, sending water pouring into his war room. When the winds finally stopped, so many trees blocked the roads that it took six hours for officials to cut their way into town by chainsaw. While no deaths were reported, 70% of the parish's homes were damaged, about half of them uninhabitable.

Taylor knew his parish--completely cut off from the outside world--wouldn't be a priority for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), not with New Orleans under siege. But based on pre-Katrina conference calls, he had every reason to believe that some federal assistance would arrive. He was wrong. Day after day there was no sign of help. Taylor sent an envoy to Baton Rouge, where FEMA and Louisiana had a joint-operations center, to plead for basic supplies. The parish's state senator, Ben Nevers, made repeated personal trips. But for more than a week, the parish was ignored.

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The problem was water--not enough to drink. The third day after the storm, Taylor and Nevers drove to Louisiana's most powerful radio station, WWL in Baton Rouge, and used the airwaves to send out a plea for the parish. "We need bare necessities," said Nevers. "We need food, water, medical supplies." FEMA made no response, but by the time Taylor and Nevers returned home, private relief was on its way. An ice company from lower Louisiana sent in truckloads. A doctor from Lafayette, La., commandeered a private plane to airlift bottles of water to Bogalusa's tiny airstrip. Three trucks sent by Nature's Way Purewater in Pennsylvania pulled in with 75,000 more bottles. Temple-Inland, whose containerboard plant is the area's largest employer, provided generators, truckloads of tarps and lumber, engineers who got the water system back up--and \$500 cash to each of its workers.

The kindness of strangers became a lifeline. A Southern Baptist Convention disaster team from Illinois rolled in with a convoy of food and volunteers, who would serve more than 14,000 meals a day. "The church groups saved us," says James Creel, who enjoyed the Baptists' hot meals as well as power from a generator donated by a Savannah church. Creel's house, like many in the area, was split by a fallen tree. A sign out front reads, WHERE'S FEMA? MUST WE BE FORGOTTEN? Creel, 48, insists he's a patriotic American, pointing out the flag pins on his cowboy hat, but says, "Where's our government? What's wrong with them?"

Heroes kept coming, from near and far. Drugstore owner Bill Nielsen and a handful of other pharmacists filled 7,000 prescriptions gratis at a local medical center. The Birmingham, Ala., police department heard the radio plea, and 20 officers showed up to reinforce the Bogalusa

police. "We were on the border of chaos," says Bogalusa police chief Jerry Agnew, who started breathing easier only after 15 more officers showed up from Oregon, Texas, and California.

Scuffles erupted in gas lines after Taylor imposed a 10-gallon-per-car limit at the parish pumps to conserve fuel for generators. As the days stretched toward a week, Taylor broke down during a church service; overwhelmed by his parish's isolation, he began sobbing like a child. One answer to his prayers came that day, when the sheriff of Middlesex County, Mass., arrived with 17 deputies in a \$1.2 million mobile command center. They had to do something to help, they told Taylor, and drove 30 hours to do it.

A FEMA team finally arrived, though it was still just setting up assistance offices as FORTUNE went to press--18 days after the storm. "It was a tough beginning," says FEMA's Tom Mullins, who blames the problem partly on the communications blackout: Parish residents couldn't call FEMA's 800 number to register for services. That doesn't cut it for Ben Nevers, who finally had to stage a sit-in at the Baton Rouge operations center to get action, and who's taken to calling himself "the representative from the black hole."

But he and others have found an optimistic moral to this story. Even when the government falls flat on its face, American society offers other levers for the resourceful. At a Sunday service of his Baptist church, the pastor asked Nevers to say a few words. "You are the people who make the difference," he preached. "There are those who are poor and those who are needy in our community. You go out and find a new neighbor, one that you might not have met yet, and ask what you can do for them. Thank you for being there for me; thank you for being there for my family; thank you for being there for Louisiana."

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