

Jessamine Countians in Louisiana helping Hurricane Katrina victims

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Carola Hartley helped a family from New Orleans get things they needed at the distribution center, leading them through lines of food, cleaning supplies, clothing and finally, toys. She helped them fill their cart with everything they needed, but she couldn't get the 5-year-old boy to pick out a few toys.

"He kept refusing to get anything I offered. He kept saying he didn't need it, he's got it at home," Hartley said.

The boy's mother just shook her head.

"How do I tell him he has no toys back home? Our house is completely under water," she said.

This is only one of many stories that volunteers from Jessamine County heard while on a relief trip to Opelousas, La. The group of nine arrived Sunday night, and by 8 a.m. Monday, they were already at work, unloading trucks, sorting supplies, helping evacuees to get through the lines.

"We don't lift properly, but at this point, I don't care," said Travis Ruda, a chiropractor and a member of the group, while carrying a huge pile of heavy boxes in front of him.

The group worked efficiently. It took only about an hour and a half on average to unload a truck. On Monday morning they unloaded a truck with supplies that they brought with them from Nicholasville, and then another one, that had just arrived from Canada. On Tuesday, there was another big truck from Jessamine County, followed by a few trucks from different areas.

People who come to get food and supplies at the distribution center are normally not shelter residents, but those who stay at hotels or with friends or family.

"Most of them came to Opelousas with just the clothes on their backs, and they're in need of everything," Hartley explained.

Tuesday afternoon, after learning what kinds of supplies the distribution was short of, Hartley and several other members of the group went shopping at Wal-Mart.

"We got detergents and bleaches, canned fruit and juices for diabetics, peanut butter and a few other items," she said.

The items filled five or six Wal-Mart carts, and the ticket was over \$1,000.

"We brought \$6,000 with us to spend on supplies or whatever evacuees might need. That's the money that people in Jessamine County raised, and every penny of it will go directly to those in need," Hartley said.

Hartley said that more help will be needed because the situation is not one that can be resolved quickly.

Thousands of people are staying in Opelousas today, taking one day at a time and not knowing how they're going to start rebuilding their lives. Their state of mind is a combination of despair and calmness, which results from losing everything, but still having themselves and their loved ones.

Troy Peloquin from New Orleans helped Rob Garrison and Tim Hartley haul boxes in the warehouse. He worked all day, refusing to get rest.

"If I don't keep moving, I'm going to cry," said the 24-year-old, whose family left their home behind to get away from Hurricane Katrina.

He didn't know when he and his family will be able to go back to their house, which was not severely affected by the storm or flooding.

Katie Gremillian, whose house was "completely under water," but whose husband and three children were safe and together, said she was happy.

"We're doing OK," she said. "We have each other."

Julie Powers, another resident of New Orleans who lived in Opelousas after fleeing the city before the hurricane, said her house was completely gone, and so was her sister's.

"It's a big change in life," she said.

Powers said her three children, ages 9, 12 and 13, keep asking where they're going have their Christmas this year.

"I just say, 'I don't know,'" she said. "But I know we're going to have a good one, because we're alive."

The group will stay in town until the end of the week, working at the warehouse and helping with other projects.

To make a donation or for more information on how to help, Jessamine Countians may call Carola Hartley at 881-3820 next week. If anyone needs to reach her this week, while the group is still in Louisiana, she can be called on her cell phone at (859) 583-5292.