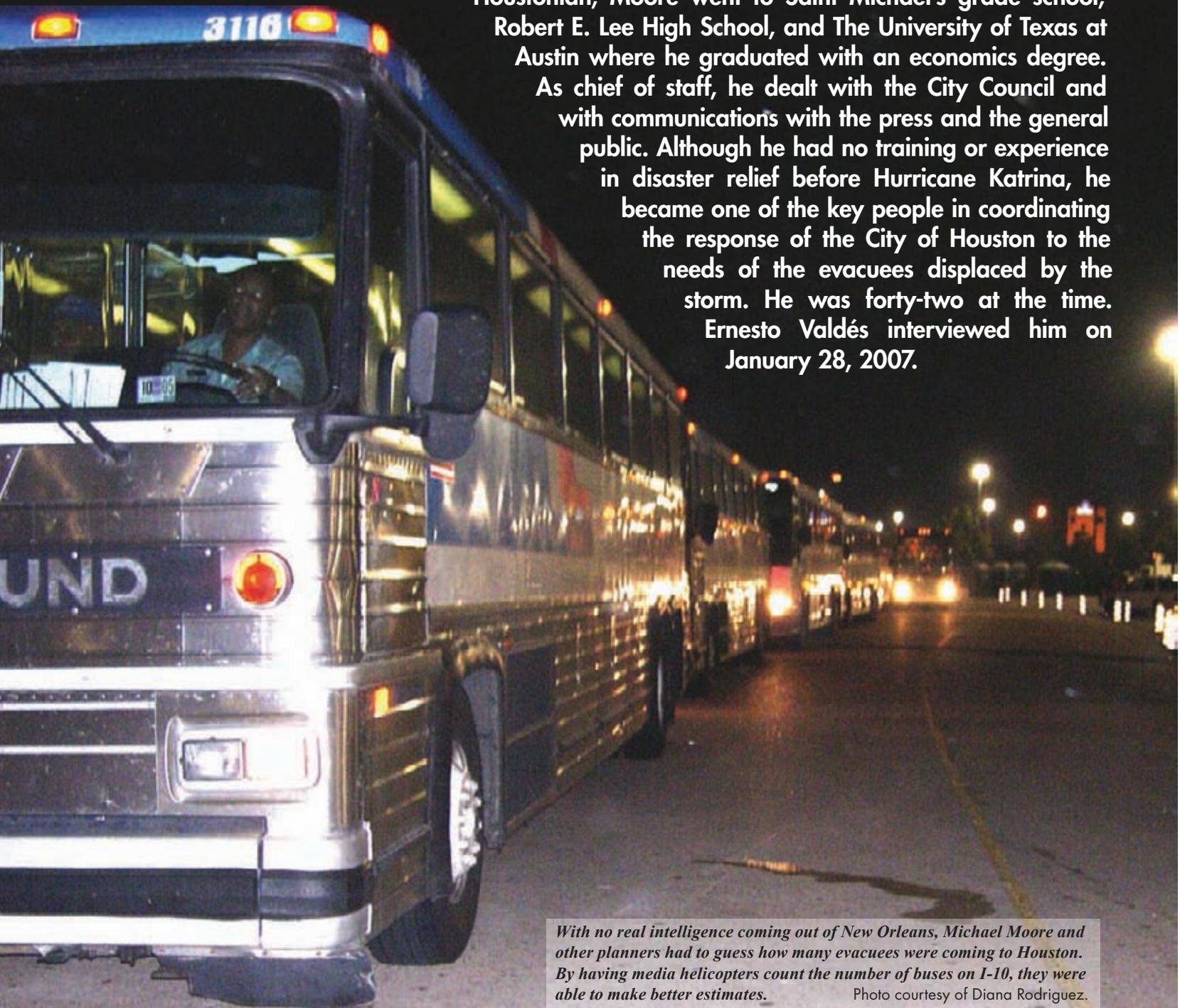


MICHAEL MOORE: Marshaling Houston's Resources to Make a Difference

As Mayor Bill White's chief of staff during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Michael Moore was in the eye of the storm of evacuees from New Orleans to Houston. A native Houstonian, Moore went to Saint Michael's grade school, Robert E. Lee High School, and The University of Texas at Austin where he graduated with an economics degree. As chief of staff, he dealt with the City Council and with communications with the press and the general public. Although he had no training or experience in disaster relief before Hurricane Katrina, he became one of the key people in coordinating the response of the City of Houston to the needs of the evacuees displaced by the storm. He was forty-two at the time. Ernesto Valdés interviewed him on January 28, 2007.



With no real intelligence coming out of New Orleans, Michael Moore and other planners had to guess how many evacuees were coming to Houston. By having media helicopters count the number of buses on I-10, they were able to make better estimates.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.

FIRST DAY

The day before [the opening of the Astrodome to evacuees], Frank Michelle the communications director and I were talking, and I said, “You know we’ve already had a fair number of evacuees that got here on their own. . . . A lot of the rest of the evacuees are coming here. It’s only natural to think we are the largest city within driving distance of New Orleans.”

The next morning . . . Frank calls me up and goes, “They’re coming.” So we had the word, and there was a meeting called at Tran Star. . . . There is an emergency operations center both at Tran Star and at our police department, the 9-1-1 headquarters, HEC the Houston Emergency Center.

We didn’t think they were coming until the next morning, and they started coming early evening. . . . What people don’t understand is . . . [that] the evacuees that came into the mass shelter, which was the Astrodome, Reliant Center, George R. Brown, were a maximum of about 30,000. There were 200,000 plus that came to Houston, somewhere people estimated between 200,000 and 300,000. The rest were in faith-based shelters, hotels, staying in people’s homes, and living in their cars. It wasn’t just all the people at the Astrodome. . . . The symbol of the evacuees being here and [the] focal point for the national media; . . . those were just the ones that basically came out of the Superdome.



At the Astrodome, medical tents were set up outside to ensure immediate attention to those in need.

One of the biggest problems . . . [was] intelligence coming out of New Orleans. Nobody could tell us how many buses were coming, and they just kept coming. Then we would hear, “You’re not getting any more tonight.” Well, they would keep coming. . . . We basically had to say it was full at one point in time. We had to start sending buses to San Antonio, and Austin, and other places. . . .

There was one time they tried to do that, and everybody just jumped off the bus and said, “I’m not going anywhere else.” Then we set up an area outside of the Astrodome on the other

side of Kirby where we actually had tents, we had food, we had water, and we got everybody off the bus. . . . Some people came with just trash bags full of stuff. They had nothing else. There were clothes there, . . . [a] bathroom; whatever they needed to do. We had doctors there to check people out if they were seniors because a lot of people that came on the buses were special needs, older, disabilities. We sat down and talked to them and said, “Look we are full here, but we are going to feed you. We are going to put you back on a clean bus, and we are going to send you on to San Antonio where they do have more room, where they do have the capability to take care of you.” So everybody was fine with that once you finally calmed them down and said, “Look you have a safe place now. You are going to be going to a safe place. . . . Just sit here and rest for a while, and then we will ask that you get back on the bus.” . . .

We spent one hour one day talking about what we were going to call these individuals . . . On the television, you heard everything from “evacuees,” “refugees,” “Cajuns,” and more derogatory terms. The term we had in the Joint Incident Command was “guest citizens.” We wanted to show them and the community our respect. We . . . [told] the press, this is what we expect. . . .

Dr. Kenneth Mattox,

*Professor and Vice Chairman of Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine,
Chief of Staff at Ben Taub Hospital.*

I spent so much time out there, and I was right in the middle of everything. From the chaos at the very beginning, these people coming off of buses looking like they have been to hell. . . . Some of them had never even been out of New Orleans before; to give them a place to sleep and some food and a shower. We stopped calling them evacuees. . . . Someone started saying, “Well, the refugees are coming.” . . . They are not refugees. They are evacuees. Get it straight. Then after the first couple of days, they were our guests. . . . The only other city that had the number of evacuees [we had] was Baton Rouge. . . .

There was nothing that was so big it was overwhelming, you just [had] to get it done. In the beginning we were planning for fifteen minutes out. Then we started planning for thirty minutes, an hour out. Then we started planning for six hours out and then . . . we were able to look twenty-four, and then two days, and three days. In the beginning . . . I was on the floor of the Arena, and we started opening these big halls and just started throwing cots in them. I put a cot down, and I look five minutes later, and there is an evacuee sitting on it. . . . You could just see their faces, and what they have been through. They have been through days in the Superdome. They just spent twelve hours on a bus. They just sat outside the Astrodome because . . . they went through a processing area when they were checked for their medical needs, this, that, and the other, and they were wiped out. Just to be able to come face to face and say, “Hey welcome to Houston. This ain’t much, but it’s a cot; and we’ll get you some food and take care of you.”

You didn’t have any downtime. It was almost a month, I’d have three hours sleep, four hours sleep, five hours sleep, but it

was basically eighteen hour days. . . . I didn't see this office for a month. . . . I would drive around and go from shelter to shelter. I was up for thirty-six hours straight during the first three days. Then I was ordered to go get some sleep. . . . I wasn't the only one. . . . We had to tell other people, "You're going home." Everybody looked after each other.

ORGANIZATION OF THE EFFORT

I was not part of the unified command structure; I was more of a representative of the mayor out of the unified command. The unified command only covered the Astrodome and the Reliant Center.

When I am the chief of staff to the mayor, I am an extension of the mayor. When I am seeing things that are needed, or that something is not getting done, it is my job to either make sure it gets done or to notify the mayor and come up with a solution to make sure it gets done. There are resources that were needed out at the Reliant Center or the George R. Brown. [It was] communicating to the mayor and helping people solve those problems.



The ability of Mayor Bill White and Judge Robert Eckles to work as a team was critical to the success of Houston's response. Shown left to right, Mayor White, attorney Lynden Rose, Judge Eckles, and Railroad Commissioner Michael Moore.

I advanced two presidential campaigns. Advance is when you go in and set up a presidential event; you have seven days to set an event up. So I have done [advance] both for candidates and the president and vice-president [in which] you deal with a lot of different situations and people. You have a very short period of time to muster the resources, the people, and deal with secret service, local police, and local elected officials, so I did have that training. . . . When you show up at a city, and you are going to organize a rally for 40,000 or 60,000 people, and you are going to bring a presidential candidate with them, or the president or the vice president, . . . it's a pretty big deal. . . . That training really helped me out here.

It was amazing how the judge [Eckles] and the mayor [White] worked as a team. Hats go off to those guys, . . . You've got two different guys that put all egos aside and said, "We've got something big to solve," . . . and they worked as a team. One would go to one meeting, and one would cover another. It was really neat to see. . . . They knew each other, . . . but they really got to know each other through this. [They] got to know intricate little things about each other and how they work, and

. . . they both deserve credit. . . . We [were] . . . all in this together, so when the judge would ask me to do something, it would be like the mayor telling or asking me to do something. . . . We were all working towards the same end. I tried to help him out, and he tried to help me out. It was just a great working relationship.

The daily briefings happened out at the Astrodome and at the George R. Brown. They were two different things. The unified command . . . was a twenty-four hour operation. You would have a morning briefing when you were changing hands, the night shift leaving and the day shift coming on, and again in the evening. Then you have a mid-day report and an end of the evening report on what [went] on during the day and what we [were] doing.

You had the virtual organization that the mayor and the judge set up [to solve problems]. That was at the George R. Brown at 8:00 every morning. It had elected officials, the non-profit groups, the faith-based groups, members of the shelter command. It had a number of the faith-based shelters, Red Cross, United Way, everybody was there. It also had private companies, corporations. Wal-Mart was there. Center Point Energy was there. I'll tell you Center Point gave us a lot of volunteers that were in a lot of key positions that really helped us out.

The first thing we would do is get updates as to what's going on; how many shelter's we've got, the number of people there, what their needs [were]. We started doing intelligence to go out and find out where the other evacuees were. We found out there was a big group in Hong Kong Mall, the Vietnamese community. We started hearing about the Hispanic group, . . . about certain churches calling other churches and taking in congregations from New Orleans, . . . about the hotels being full and people running out of money. . . . [At the meetings] you brought a problem, you had a status report from the shelters, . . . who could solve the problem, . . . and then we would go onto the next problem, . . . [and] identify what we needed to do the next day. . . . It would usually last an hour to an hour and a half. . . . The mayor and the judge ran it like clockwork. If you tried to . . . give a speech, you were shut down immediately and told, "We are here to solve problems." It helped bring everything together, and we were solving this thing as a community. . . . The virtual organization and that 8:00 meeting at the George R. Brown . . . really helped organize the community.

CITY OF HOUSTON RESOURCES

When the phone [call came that] said, "We are going to take the people from the Superdome and put them in the Astrodome." Nobody realized, wait a minute, it's not working at the Superdome, how do you think it is going to work at the Astrodome? You can only put people where they can actually put a cot and have a place to stand. You can't put people in the seats. Luckily, Reliant Park had the Astrodome, Reliant Arena, and Reliant Center; so it had the capacity. But at first, the fire marshals went into the Astrodome and said, I think, it was 8,000 maximum. That wasn't enough room. . . . The mayor actually overruled the fire marshal—the only person that can overrule the fire marshal. . . . We moved it to 12,000 so we could actually use the concourses for people to sleep on. Then we started moving to the Arena and, then, to Reliant Center after that. You just can't take 25,000 or 30,000 people and put them in the Astrodome; it doesn't work. . . . We needed more large shelter space. So, . . . the decision was made to open up the George R. Brown.

Moore worked with various departments of the City of Houston to mobilize the resources needed by the evacuees. After hearing of a small outbreak of the Norwalk virus at the Dome, he responded aggressively.

I called the mayor and said one of the things [with] Norwalk is [that] people have to wash their hands. People have to get clean. The Astrodome, Reliant Center, and George R. Brown are set up for a three-hour football game . . . [not] for somebody to live there twenty-four hours . . . and neither is the staffing to clean it. . . . We called Building Services for the City of Houston and said, “Get every available janitor you can get that works for the city and have them start doing that, and let’s call the county, and let’s start rotating shifts to keep those places clean to stop the spread of the Norwalk virus.” All of a sudden we started seeing all the City of Houston janitors showing up at the Astrodome, going through and cleaning restrooms and the facilities. At the same time, the hospital folks were handing out hand disinfectant. Those people that went out to stop the spread of that [virus], . . . those are my heroes. . . . I knew that we had over 20,000 [employees], we have basically an army . . . from police, fire, janitors, parks department, everything, public works. . . . You have to use those resources, and you have to use them in a wise way. That was just one example of seeing a problem, calling the mayor, telling him about the problem, and he said, “Do it, make it happen.” So we made it happen.

The mayor is in charge of the City of Houston—very strong mayoral form of government. City Council gets spending authority, . . . but the mayor is the one that marshals the groups in the city. So when he says, “go do something,” we had building services out helping the shelters, whatever they needed. We had folks building showers at the George R. Brown. We had parks department helping clean the exterior of the Reliant Center because if you keep the place clean, everybody will be calmed down. We had folks from parks department helping set up outside activities at the Reliant Center [and George R. Brown] . . . for the school age kids. . . . We used all the resources we had, and the expertise we had, where we needed it.

One of the coolest things . . . we did early on . . . [was] set up daycare. If you gave the kids something to do, . . . where the kids could go and play and forget their problems for a while and let the parents figure out . . . “Okay, let me try and find my cousin. Let me try and find my uncle. Let me go stand in the FEMA line for hours and deal with this.” [To] know that their kids are taken care of and, at the end of the day, know that they are happy, it helped settle things down.

Immediately they started organizing those kids going to schools. At one point in time we had over 25,000 kids in the local schools. That’s not easy. . . . I know Jesuit High School ended up holding the Katrina classes at night for the Jesuit High School in New Orleans and the regular school during the day. HISD did a great job. . . . You have to find teachers . . . It’s a lot of classes.



By utilizing the city’s resources, the response team provided a daycare center with a playground. This enabled parents to have time to deal with administrative needs while giving the children a chance to play and, in turn, calm down.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers did a lot of the work. We couldn’t have done it without volunteers. . . .

The Red Cross is in charge of actually putting together shelters. They have cots stored around the country. They didn’t have this many cots. . . . We still had people coming in, and we still didn’t have enough cots for the George R. Brown and other facilities. The Red Cross put a call out to fly in more cots. I don’t know where they flew in from. . . . They said, “The cots are being unloaded off an airplane at Intercontinental Airport.”

So I pick up the phone and . . . I said, “I need a police escort for these.” I think this is the first police escort of a truck full of cots in history. . . .

The Red Cross [was] stretched to the limit and they didn’t have enough resources because they were covering the whole Gulf Coast. They . . . did a tremendous job, and they are better because of this. . . .



Getting the children in school was a major concern for responders. HISD schools took in over 25,000 students from New Orleans.



figure out how to get the hot water. . . . It is finding the right plumber engineer [to] sit there and think outside the box, and go, “OK, I can set up fifteen right here.” We’ll put curtains around it and divide it. . . . At the George R. Brown they put washing machines that weren’t there before. We had to build a small city for a short period of time. It was a community; there were people that came out of the woodwork.

Imagine taking yourself with nothing except a small bag and go to another city, and you have nothing else. You haven’t showered for days; you haven’t eaten right for days. It is the little things. . . . We had local barbers and hair dressers come out there and set up shop just to give people haircuts . . . It does such wonderful [things] for the psyche. People would just go up there and set up shop and give [their services] for free. . . . The community really came out.

The organizers of the relief effort could not have accomplished what they did without the help of over 43,000 volunteers.

We had the Mexican Red Cross come in, and they were really helpful. . . . There were a significant number of Hispanic evacuees; but they didn’t go to the Astrodome. . . . We had this great group of fire fighters from Mexico. . . . Councilman [Adrian] Garcia actually put them to work. There was another group, . . . a large population of Vietnamese outside of New Orleans that I think were in the fishing industry. . . . They went out to Hong Kong mall and other places in the Vietnamese community. There were thousands of them. We had to find people that could speak to them and tell them what we can do, where they can go for help. . . .

I got a phone call [from] Catholic Charities [that] had a line around the block, and they needed some HPD help. . . . One small church might have taken care of twenty people and another one might have taken care of 400. . . . People came in and grabbed small families and said, “I have a garage apartment. Come off the floor and stay in my garage apartment.” There were churches that came and pulled bus loads of people and took them to their church.

Eisenhower said something one time, you can plan, and plan, and plan—and planning is a good thing—but once something happens, you throw the plan out the window. . . . You just need to know your resources. Luckily, I was in a position to know the resources at hand for the City of Houston and be able to help the mayor and the city in that situation. . . . I’ll give you an example. . . . We needed someone to come over and start building showers . . . because people had to take showers. . . . There are drains and pipes, and you have to

Red Cross volunteers came from Mexico to assist with Hispanic evacuees. Shown here with Dr. Persse (left) at St. Agnes Baptist Church.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.

HOUSING

Then you have the Joint Katrina Housing Task Force, which ended up taking everybody out of the shelters and putting them into apartments. We had around 40,000 apartment units that people who had vouchers were put in. That is 40,000 units multiplied by three point something [people]. That is over 120,000 put in these apartment units. You only had 25,000 to 29,000 in these mass shelters. Think about everybody else that was here. Those are the people that needed the vouchers. There are a lot of other people that didn’t need the vouchers that had a company that helped them out, or had their own savings, or got help from faith-based organizations. . . . So when people concentrate . . . [on] the Astrodome and the George R. Brown, well, a lot of things were going on outside.





Local hair stylists and barbers came to the shelters to offer their services to Houston's "guest citizens" free of charge.

Guy Larkin . . . is with the Harris County Housing Authority. Their next step was getting the people out of the mass shelters and putting them in apartments. The first [groups placed were] seniors, disabled, and then mothers with young kids. . . . I followed the second [bus] . . . from the Astrodome out to a place

off of Airline and I-45. . . . Almost everybody on there was a disabled senior, and that is what this place was for. . . . They walked [in] like they were in heaven. . . . They said, "So what are we here for a week?" . . . They asked us three times. "No you are here for a while." . . .

[One of the women said,] "I've never had a dishwasher, ever in my place." That is all she could talk about was having a dishwasher. . . . To see that on their faces . . . a lot of them are still there today. . . .

HOUSTON

We are not [just] the fourth largest city, I think we are a community. . . . We are a working city; we come here to work. You come here for a city of opportunity, but if somebody is in need, Houstonians are there. Nothing is too big for Houstonians or Texans. When this challenge came in, it was all hands in. . . .

The people that were trying to rescue New Orleans and Mississippi, those people were really on the front lines. We were on the front

lines here, but we were receiving. We had all of our infrastructure in place. We had all the assets of the fourth largest city in the United States. We had two great leaders leading us, the judge and the mayor. We just had a lot of work ahead of us . . .

You really cannot plan for something like this. On being a receiver city for evacuees or being a city that evacuates, we are the most prepared city in the United States, and it is because we have done it. 

Leasa Sullivan: Thoughts on Apartment Housing

Leasa Sullivan, a property manager in Conroe, Texas, for ten years, shared her experiences during Katrina in correspondence with *Houston History* on June 8, 2010.

Within three days of the hurricane, buses began arriving at our apartment community to drop off evacuees who came from the Astrodome. FEMA had announced that they would pay for a hotel/motel room or an apartment to help those who qualified for assistance. FEMA required the evacuees to apply online using their actual address in Louisiana, and about 95% of applicants with a verifiable address received approval. We kept a running spreadsheet of the evacuees' names and FEMA numbers to turn into FEMA for reimbursement. One snag was the inability to run a criminal background check since all systems were down in Louisiana.

At one point, I had about thirty evacuees in my office who were distressed and not sure what to do. It was very difficult to see, and to imagine, what they were going through. We tried to make them as relaxed as possible and reassure them that they would have a place to stay. Our property in Conroe housed over 100 evacuees and their families, which ranged from single families to extended families living with further extended families.

We knew the evacuees had basically lost everything

including clothes, housewares, furniture, etc. The first night, I was able to purchase towels, basic toiletries, pillows, and blankets for six families to make it through the night. By the time the buses started arriving the next day, several local residents had contacted me to make donations, including a house full of furniture, clothes, car seats, cribs, money, and much more—all donated by local Conroe residents. We had such a huge outpouring of people wanting to help that we started a donation center in the clubroom at the apartment community. The main area contained clothing and food, one office had kitchenware, another office had bedding, and the list went on. The local Jack in the Box restaurant, which was remodeling, brought over all of its old tables and chairs for some of the evacuees.

I organized a crew from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to help with cleaning, painting, and basic make readies for the apartments. The church members donated two weekends of their time and ended up turning approximately seventy-five units so that the evacuees could move in as soon as possible. Additionally, one person from the church worked the donation center every day making sure that the new residents could find what they needed. It was amazing to see the small city of Conroe come together to help people in this way. 