Disaster Relief Aids Veteran Victims of Hurricane

As Hurricane Isaac slowly crept toward New Orleans, memories of Katrina filled the minds of southern Louisiana residents. Isaac, struck the state’s coast as a Category one storm on the same date as Katrina in 2005. Residents feared a repeat of destruction and loss.

DAV, using the experience of Katrina, was ready before Isaac came ashore. “Two Mobile Service Offices (MSOs) were dispatched to the area from Florida and Arkansas,” said National Service Director Garry Augustine. “Each was supplied with disaster relief vouchers to provide immediate financial assistance to injured and ill veterans stricken by the storm.”

“Each hurricane has characteristics of its own,” said Department of Louisiana Adjutant Charles Holdeman. “Each one does something different.”

Instead of flooding New Orleans, the late August storm hit the parishes south and east of the city hardest. “Water to the south came up six feet and flooded many homes there,” said Holdeman. “Areas north of Lake Pontchartrain were flooded and leveled. The wind blew water over the lake’s 15-foot
causeway.”

More than 13,000 homes were damaged by the storm, and nearly 95,000 people requested federal aid to repair homes and replace lost belongings. Flooding caused most of the damage. Nine lives were lost, five in Louisiana.

“When disasters strike, DAV is there to help veterans recover,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “Disaster relief vouchers make it possible for recipients to have the basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing right away when their needs are so crucial.”

“Knowing the storm was coming and would strike a very vulnerable area with thousands of veterans, DAV was able to pre-position resources to provide disaster aid,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director Barry Jesinoski. “As soon as the storm dissipated, we moved quickly into the areas of greatest destruction to render much-needed aid.”

“We learned that the area south of Baton Rouge was one of the hardest,” said Augustine. “We directed our resources there and were fully prepared for the veterans coming to us for assistance.”

Holdeman joined the DAV MSOs at Denham Springs, La., near Baton Rouge where hundreds of veterans gathered for help. “The first day we had 97 veterans come to us,” he said. “The next day, probably 150 people came.”

Besides providing emergency funds, Holdeman said drinking water was brought in for the veterans, and arrangements were made so they could wait in air-conditioned buildings to be interviewed by DAV National Service Officers.

“These veterans were very happy to get DAV’s help,” Holdeman said. “They all thanked us, and we even added five new members. They really wanted to join DAV when they saw what we were doing.”
The distribution of vouchers later moved to DAV’s New Orleans National Service Office. “In all, we distributed vouchers to about 500 veterans, which exhausted our supply and ability to help,” said Augustine. “We help as many veterans as we can, but our funding, although substantial, was completely distributed.”

“When a storm strikes one veteran, it strikes us all. We are an organization of veterans helping veterans,” said Wilson. “Those who suffered total loss of home and property had a friend in DAV.”

“Our national service staff got a first hand look of the gratitude and appreciation for DAV from the relieved victims of Hurricane Isaac,” said Jesinoski. “They were eager for the opportunity to help these injured and ill veterans at a time of great need. They displayed the heart and core of our organization to those in need.”

“Our disaster aid support is simply one of the services we provide to help the men and women who served,” said Augustine. “We could not do this on behalf of our veterans without the support of a generous public.”

“This was an inspiring effort,” said Holdeman. “Some people came to DAV from great distances because they had lost everything. They really had no one to turn to but DAV. The whole effort made me feel good.”