

Stay + Connected

Making Houston home

Continuing Response: September 21 - November 2

As needs go from immediate to long-term, Neighborhood Centers Inc. establishes a support initiative designed to ensure successful relocations for hurricane survivors.

For most Houstonians, life goes on as if nothing ever happened.

The hot, humid days of summer are behind us. Fall is in the air, and the holidays are right around the corner.

But for an estimated 150,000 Houstonians – transplants to the city uprooted by Hurricane Katrina – life is anything but normal. These new neighbors continue to struggle to find housing, work, transportation and the basic necessities needed to rebuild their lives.

“Neighborhood Centers Inc. provided a very critical element of case management. The main focus throughout the City’s response effort was how to minimize the psychological and traumatic impact that all of this was having on young people. Everyone agreed that trying to create some normalcy was a part of that, and bringing in Neighborhood Centers’ expertise on children and youth helped dramatically.”

Adrian Garcia
Houston City Councilman

Long-term support

Since the first evacuees began arriving from New Orleans and surrounding areas in the initial days of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, Neighborhood Centers Inc. has been on the ground providing assistance, encouragement and guidance.

To support the relief effort effectively as it moved to longer-term objectives, Neighborhood Centers Inc. created the Stay Connected initiative, a comprehensive and compassionate program to link hurricane survivors to resources needed to gain financial stability, obtain and sustain permanent housing and employment, and gain a renewed sense of community

as new residents of the Greater Houston area.

These goals are being met by building on the existing strengths that these families possess – strengths developed out of their culture, history and sense of community.

Our work is hands-on, one-on-one and uniquely tailored to each individual

and family, as needed.

Our goal is not to “refer and move on.” It’s to stay involved – Stay Connected – until each family we are working with is settled and self-sufficient.

Building on assets

Neighborhood Centers Inc. first met hurricane evacuees at the George R. Brown Convention Center when it opened as a mass shelter.

At the invitation and request of the City of Houston, we set up a mini-service center at the facility. Our promise to the City – which we fulfilled – was that we would stay as long as the shelter remained open.



During the two and a half weeks we were there, we gathered a lot of information about the individuals and families we met – the backbone of our Stay Connected database.

This database allows us to track evacuees’ needs and the services provided by Neighborhood Centers Inc. and others. More importantly, it gives us the opportunity to also document their skills, assets and resources.

Neighborhood Centers Inc. believes



A new Houston neighbor enjoys her SpongeBob SquarePants doll, one of the many stuffed animals donated by 8-year-old Zac Cohen of Chicago.

strongly in building on assets (rather than just “meeting needs”), which has led to the following components of the Stay Connected initiative:

Connecting to resources

Most evacuees arrived in Houston with no information about the services available – or even where to turn for information.

So Neighborhood Centers Inc. plans to hire evacuees with social service

We need your help!

Can you help us continue to provide the support and assistance that our new neighbors need?

“Houston businesses and residents have been incredibly generous in their donations to the relief effort,” said Marc Levinson, Director of Agency Relations for Neighborhood Centers Inc. “But there is still tremendous need out there. It’s important to remember that many of these people lost their homes, their jobs and all their belongings. And they lost their support systems – because their families and friends were impacted by the storm, too. Getting them back to self-sufficiency will require time, effort and a great deal of resources.”

Levinson says that while the immediate need of food and clothing has subsided somewhat, the Stay Connected initiative still needs cash donations to fund assistance programs and provide support to evacuees.

The Neighborhood Centers Inc. annual holiday toy drive needs additional donors, too, since the number of children to be served has grown tremendously. Any donation of new toys or cash would be greatly appreciated.

If you’d like to help with a cash or in-kind donation, please contact Marc Levinson at 713-669-5222. If you can provide services to survivors or would like to volunteer, please contact Dave Detcher at 713-669-5304. You can also contact Detcher for information on the toy drive.

backgrounds to work as Service Connectors – providing linkage to employment, housing and much-needed social assistance for their peers.

Under the supervision of Program Director Dave Detcher, the Service Connectors will work with fellow evacuees to establish plans for obtaining and keeping permanent housing. Regular meetings between families and their Service Connector will help facilitate decision-making. And volunteers will conduct follow-up assessments to ensure that families are making progress.

Connecting to education

As of November 2, there were 119 children of evacuees enrolled in our Head Start program. We're also working to add school-age children and youth to our existing Community Center programs.

"The biggest barrier we face is transportation," said Detcher. "We're in real

Connecting to community

Our seven Community Centers and 20 Senior Centers – which offer supportive, "feels like home" environments – are giving survivors a place to gather in their new neighborhoods.

"We're also planning a series of cultural celebrations that will honor the heritage of Louisiana while giving folks a chance to meet and build new relationships with their fellow Houstonians," Detcher said.

Connecting in collaboration

Neighborhood Centers Inc. is respected for being a collaborative agency. As always, we are collaborating with new and existing partners to eliminate duplication and provide the most cost-effective services possible.

For example, two case managers with the Children's Defense Fund of Houston are providing services to evacuees focusing on job placement, housing and healthcare. And social workers and other professional staff from the Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pa., are performing re-assessments and helping us operate a distribution and information center.

We're also planning to collaborate with Skills for Living and the national Financial Planners Association to provide financial literacy and planning services for Katrina-displaced families. And we have an existing partnership with Unity Church of Christianity, which provided us with the funds to purchase furniture for 100 families.

"We're in discussions with a number of other nonprofit agencies, service organizations and faith-based organizations to help us fill in the gaps," Detcher said.

Connecting the unconnected

There is still much to be done.

In addition to the more than 1,200 families currently identified and in our database, we're partnering with Family Services of Greater Houston to work with evacuees referred to us by that agency.

Neighborhood Centers Inc. anticipates that most families will need 3 to 6 months of case management services to ensure that they have secured housing and obtained employment, as well as received any needed social services such as healthcare, childcare or mental health services, and even financial assistance. Others will need longer-term support. Whatever it takes, Neighborhood Centers Inc. will be here for them to turn to.

Thanks to all

Neighborhood Centers Inc. has received many donations of financial and material resources, from across the street to around the nation.

The most significant to date was a \$120,000 donation from Unity Church of Christianity, which was used to provide furniture for our new neighbors.



The Rev. Howard Caesar of Unity Church of Christianity presents a \$120,000 check to Angela Blanchard, President and CEO of Neighborhood Centers Inc. The money was used to purchase furniture for hurricane survivors.

A special thanks goes to Fiesta Mart for donating grocery gift certificates. Fiesta Mart was the first corporate donor to step up and help Neighborhood Centers Inc. with our Hurricane Katrina relief effort.

And a hearty Texas thank-you goes to social workers and other staff from the Milton Hershey School in Pennsylvania, who helped set up and distribute material resources at our Harbach-Ripley Community Center in October.

Other contributions include gifts from Zac Cohen, an 8-year-old from Chicago, who collected thousands of stuffed animals to be distributed to Katrina-displaced kids throughout the Gulf Coast because, in his words, "a stuffed animal makes kids feel safe," the effervescent Dianne Naplan, a retired music teacher from Boston, who spent a week sharing her knowledge at several Neighborhood Centers Inc. Senior Centers, the Charter School and Head Start Centers; and Office Depot, which donated hundreds of new backpacks filled with school supplies to ease the transition into a new school for youngsters attending Alcott Elementary in Sunnyside.

The success of our Stay Connected program comes from many caring and generous donors, who have contributed both financial and material resources to Neighborhood Centers Inc. for the benefit of our new neighbors.



Dave Detcher and Marc Levinson (in the red T-shirts) represented Neighborhood Centers Inc. on the Houston PBS program "Our Community Responds," an unprecedented 10-hour live broadcast on Oct. 22 featuring disaster relief and recovery work in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In addition to Detcher, left, and Levinson, the segment featured Meg Heagy from the Milton Hershey School at far left and Katrina survivors Wanda Daliet and Bryan Jacob and their adorable twin 3-year-old sons. The group is shown here being interviewed by Channel 8's Paula Fleming.

need of 15-passenger vans to bring these young people to our centers. We also need funding to hire additional staff to accommodate them."

Connecting to opportunities

A recent study, conducted by Dr. Ritalinda D'Andrea with the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work and funded in part by the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast, revealed that prior to their evacuation, 70 percent of the survivors who relocated to the Houston area were employed full-time – and an additional 10 percent were employed on a part-time basis.

We're building on these and other identified assets by connecting workers with job placement services and other employment resources, matching their skills to available opportunities all across the region.

We also hope to employ a number of evacuees to work as substitute teachers and aides in our Charter School and Head Start programs, as outreach workers for our Healthy Start program, and as facility personnel to assist with ongoing maintenance and facility issues at our 63 service sites.

Can you help?

For in-kind or cash donations, call Marc Levinson at 713-669-5222.

To volunteer or provide services, call Dave Detcher at 713-669-5304.



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Building futures.

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