

Aftermath 2005

“There was no highly organized, centralized place for SH&E professionals to go to volunteer”—a frustrating roadblock encountered by ASSE members in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season. Dave Heidorn discusses how ASSE has tried to help.

It's January of a new year, but 2005 will linger for some time, it seems. Issues of last year will continue into 2006. Senator Enzi dropped his OSHA reform bill just before Thanksgiving, when everyone was gone in DC, after we waited for it all year (even longer). At this writing, we were still waiting on OSHA to publish its HazCom rulemaking on global harmonization. We are waiting for new heads of OSHA and MSHA, for new leadership directions that are long overdue.

It seems very much the same with Katrina and its aftermath. Who would have thought the word “aftermath” could have been used so much, last so long as a meaningful word in so many lives?

Right after I received the e-mail from Senator Enzi's office that his bill had been dropped, Frank Marotta, Government Affairs Chair and former president of the Long Island Chapter sent me an e-mail:

Hi Dave. You may recall that we have spoken in the past and met at a PDC several years ago. I am writing you to endorse ASSE's position regarding the safety of Katrina workers. In my capacity as a volunteer firefighter, I have worked this past month for FEMA in the Gulf Coast area of Mississippi (Pascagoula, Gautier, Moss Point and Ocean Springs). I put my name on a few websites volunteering as a safety professional and attorney, but the firefighter connection (U.S. Fire Administration) was the best.

There is still much that has to be done here and I regularly see people working at risk (especially on large jobs, like hotel refurb where I have yet to see fall protection), and I imagine that illness and injury statistics are significant but unpublished. I am amazed also at the use of handkerchiefs where you know respirators are needed. The term “Katrina cough” is used in the papers and is attributed to mold, sheetrock dust and other unknowns.

While here, I “lease-in” people into their FEMA trailers. This consists of making sure everything works (about one-third of the time we repaired something), then teaching the new occupants how to operate the trailer. It was extremely rewarding work and I wish I could stay here longer, but my employer agreed to a 30-day stint. My first day back in New York will be 12/1. Feel free to contact me if you want to discuss this further. —Frank

We tried—hard. Right after Katrina, ASSE received e-mails from members—including a whole chapter in Washington—asking where they could volunteer to help. Some were close to angry that there seemed to be no place for them, people with highly specialized training and experience in dealing with the kinds of risks to human life, safety and health that they knew were going to follow, and that workers and responders were already facing.

I talked to OSHA. The agency wanted to set up staging areas where their alliance partners could go to contribute PPE, volunteer safety and health training. I told them great, that we had members ready to come and help. Nothing happened.

Last January, OSHA had touted the creation of a Worker Health and Safety Annex plan to deal with occupational safety and health issues when the Dept. of Homeland Security's National Response Plan was put in place. OSHA wanted the annex to be opened. Key staff at OSHA tried to make it happen. But, like many things in the aftermath that had to do with FEMA and DHS, it took a while.

OSHA seemed to be doing what it could. I heard

from members in Louisiana and Mississippi who saw OSHA at work there. Some things were happening. OSHA told me an ASSE chapter in the Gulf region was giving out PPE. We sent out a ton of information on the resources available from NIOSH, EPA and OSHA. We sent out e-mail addresses that the federal government was using for people to volunteer. I heard from members like Frank who had places to volunteer. Philip Jacobs, a member of ASSE's Ergonomics Task Force, is a member of a Jewish disaster response group (www.nechama.org) and went down to help.

But more often than not, members had no place to volunteer. There simply seemed to be no way to help. Opportunity passed. OSHA was hamstrung. It is a federal agency whose key job is enforcement. It could not accept volunteer work. It could not accept donations, even of PPE. There was no highly organized, centralized place for SH&E professionals to go to volunteer.

In the end, we could send letters and talk to staffers on the Hill. We sent a letter supporting a bill introduced by senators Enzi and Kennedy that made sure OSHA would coordinate any safety and health issues and gave the agency money to do so. But we also asked that they consider adding provisions to require safety and health training for workers going in, and that they use OSHA's idea to set up centralized staging areas. We asked for provisions to support volunteer efforts. And we asked that the state and municipal workers risking their lives and well being get the same occupational safety and health coverage as private-sector workers—which has long been a key ASSE goal.

Then, in October, during a visit with key House staff, ASSE was shown a copy of a bill introduced by Congressman Jindal (R-LA). It would give OSHA the ability to accept volunteers and donations. It was what we had wanted in conversations with OSHA early on. It was what our members wanted.

As we developed another letter to support this bill, I talked to a leading ASSE member in Louisiana who was involved in the heart of the response. “What do you think?” I asked. “It's already too late. Contractors are saying, ‘If I knew I had to do all that training I wouldn't have bid this contract at this level.’ Workers are going in without protections and they don't seem to even care. Everyone just wants the money. I tell you, there's gonna be some serious problems. Legislation, that's all well and good, but by the time that gets passed, we're way beyond that.”

And, so, in 2006, we will continue to try to respond to the aftermath. The letter says we want these provisions to apply not only in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita, but also in every disaster, maybe every time OSHA's annex gets activated. Much safety and health work needs to be done in response to Katrina. Like Frank Marotta, many members are still out there, working to protect workers. But in government affairs, it's about the future. So, in 2006 while we deal with new heads of federal safety agencies, Senator Enzi's OSHA reform bills and perhaps HazCom global harmonization, we'll not only be working to make sure the safety and health risks faced by workers in the current aftermath are addressed, but also will be striving to ensure that there is no question where a bunch of eager, expert volunteer SH&E professionals can go to help save lives, prevent injuries and illnesses the next time a Katrina comes around.



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