

Locals say not enough has been done to help Katrina victims

By John Hilliard/Daily News staff

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Two years after Hurricane Katrina smashed the Gulf Coast and shattered the lives of thousands of people, recovery continues as a mix of federal aid dollars, volunteers and - perhaps most of all - patience slowly rebuilds the region.

But far more remains to be done.

"I have to say, it doesn't look a heck of a lot different than (when) I was there ... it's disheartening," said Ashland resident Holly Veum, who traveled to New Orleans three months after the storm to help distribute food. "The fact is, they'll probably need help for a number of years."

The Aug. 29, 2005, storm - the deadliest to hit the U.S. coast in a century - cut a wide swath of destruction through the region that claimed more than 1,600 lives in Louisiana and Mississippi, according to the Associated Press.

The federal government has committed a total of \$114 billion to the Gulf Coast region, \$96 billion of which is already disbursed or available to local governments. But most of it has been for disaster relief, not long-term recovery.

Locals who have worked as part of the Gulf Coast recovery effort all agreed the brunt of the recovery has been borne by volunteers, donated money and materials.

"It really is the obligation of fellow Americans and communities like ours to reach out," said Tom Fey, a member of the Wayland to Waveland Steering Committee.

The Wayland-based group has donated supplies and helped organize building programs in Waveland, Miss. - "ground zero" of Katrina's strike against the Gulf Coast.

Fey has been there five times and said he sees improvements each time.

Although Fey said there are limits to what federal officials can do on the coast, fellow committee member Cindy Lombardo said the government "came up short" in its response.

"It's criminal (Gulf Coast residents) should have to live in FEMA trailers this long," said Lombardo.

The local organization has built two homes in Waveland since its founding in 2005. According to the group, about 40 of the roughly 5,500 homes in Waveland remained after Katrina hit.

Wayland to Waveland is now working with Waltham-based developer Kenneth Vona Construction to bring about 400 skilled workers and several other contractors to Mississippi. They hope to build eight new homes between Oct. 15 and Feb. 5, and are raising about \$1.5 million to help cover the cost.

More information about the group can be found online at www.waylandtowaveland.org.

In New Orleans, about \$7.6 billion is needed to strengthen the city's levee system to withstand a 100-year storm and improve the area's drainage system. Although the levees are not yet ready for the next massive storm, they are slated to be strengthened by 2015.

Maria Salomao-Schmidt, a Holliston Realtor who helped rebuild a New Orleans home with a 25-member group from the Unitarian Church in Sherborn, said little government or official aid was visible.

"I was horrified at what I saw when I went down there," said Salomao-Schmidt. "Even though we went a year-and-a-half later, the scale (of destruction) and pain you see just gives you goosebumps."

The first day, Sheetrock for construction was stolen from the work site, she said, and a member of the family the group sought to help reported seeing dead babies floating in the flood waters in 2005.

"The response is totally unacceptable and not how you treat our people," she said, who also noted, "It's not too late to go help people."

Franklin resident John Chickering has gone to Pearlinton, Miss., three times to help rebuild five homes as part of a team from the Franklin United Methodist Church.

He last visited Pearlinton in June and said there are signs of progress. But he has heard estimates it will take as long as a decade to completely finish the work in the region.

"I think a lot of people are being very patient," he said.

Cherylann Lambert Walsh, founder and director of Project Just Because in Hopkinton, said about a half-dozen families from the Gulf Coast moved to

MetroWest after being taken to Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod.

One family that moved to Hopkinton - and received donations from Project Just Because - has since returned to the Gulf Coast, she said. The others have not.

"Some (evacuees) just aren't going back," she said.

(Material from the Associated Press was used in this report. John Hilliard can be reached at 508-626-4449 or [jhiliar@cnc.com](mailto:jhilliar@cnc.com).)

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