

Katrina Devastates Gulf Records

Hurricane Katrina hit records hard. The upside, however, is that she may have convinced those still relying on vulnerable paper records to enter the 21st century.

Nikki Swartz

When Hurricane Katrina crashed into the Gulf Coast, she brought torrential rain, widespread flooding, and unbelievable damage. Towns were wiped off the map, families were separated, and lives were swept away. What Katrina did not batter and bruise, the floodwaters finished off. Many who survived the storm – what many are now calling the worst natural disaster in U.S. history – did so with little more than the shirts on their backs.

Now, those survivors face a different kind of disaster: Wind, floodwater, and mold has damaged, soaked, and ruined vital records in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Medical records, school records, law enforcement records, court records, and even driver's license records were also victims. Without them, Katrina survivors cannot prove where they lived, what they owned, or even who they are. For those who lived and worked in the Gulf Coast states before the hurricane, rebuilding their records may be an even greater challenge than rebuilding their homes, jobs, and cities.

Lost Identities

Hundreds of thousands of victims lost personal and financial records, includ-

ing medical, dental, and tax records, birth certificates, and Social Security cards, as well as credit cards and driver's licenses. Without such basic, vital records proving a person's identity, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to identify those who died in the disaster.

Records that were filed electronically on tape or disc can be saved, most experts say, but those without electronic records will have to start over in most cases. Louisiana residents who fled without a critical form of identification – their birth certificates – may not be able to replace them for a while. Louisiana's vital records office – which has stored all state birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, and divorce papers for the past 100 years – was based in New Orleans. The records are currently inaccessible, but were being stored in a safe, dry place, according to the executive director of the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems, which connects all the United States' vital records offices.

Compounding the problems, most employees of the New Orleans office were themselves victims of the hurricane. In the weeks after Katrina hit, media reports said the office was operating with only three or four people – 5 percent of its staff.

Identity database firm ChoicePoint

offers a service called *VitalChek.com*, which allows people to order birth certificates and other documents online from all 50 states. But displaced Louisiana natives cannot use VitalChek because the service relies on the state's vital records offices to produce the documents.

Local and federal agencies have relaxed identification standards for individuals in the affected areas. For example, officials say lack of identification is not a barrier for the Louisiana Department of Health's economic assistance office, which has been expediting applications for food stamps, child support, and other critical services. The office asks for only one form of identification from applicants and, if that is not available, it is not a barrier.

Similarly, Mississippi hurricane victims can get a replacement driver's license for \$20 cash while they wait. The Mississippi Department of Public Safety driver services division usually requires two forms of identification, but it said a driver with no ID can provide his or her Social Security number to get a replacement. Louisiana drivers in Mississippi can go through a similar procedure, but they must wait for a Louisiana driver's license office to mail the license to a Mississippi office.

Without a driver's license, simply cashing a check can be difficult. The

USA PATRIOT Act requires banks to verify an account holder's identity before he or she opens a new account – usually with a driver's license. But the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, a banking regulator, issued a statement after the storm asking for lenience: "Banks are encouraged to use other verification methods for individuals affected by the storm who do not have traditional forms of identification, such as driver's licenses." The statement, posted on the agency's website, recommended background checks and other methods to verify identity.

Hurricane survivors will need much more help in the coming years. Perhaps the most difficult challenge for them will be proving who they are in the absence of birth certificates and driver's licenses.

Essential Services in Crisis

According to a *Newsweek* report, more than 1 million people were separated from their primary care physicians, hospitals, and pharmacists during the disaster, giving new impetus to the debate over electronic healthcare records (EHRs). For the past decade, healthcare experts have encouraged doctors to upgrade paper records to digital ones. But without federal grants, it has been a tough sell.

Only 20 percent of U.S. hospitals have adopted EHRs, and Kindred Hospital New Orleans is one of those. Fifty-four patients who were evacuated from the long-term, acute-care hospital a few days after the hurricane were able to electronically send their digitized records to the other Kindred facilities in Houston and Baton Rouge where they were transferred. For the few patients airlifted to non-Kindred hospitals, Kindred was able to print out and mail hard copies of digital records overnight, according to a hospital spokesperson.

Still, a majority of Gulf Coast healthcare providers operated paper-based offices. The hurricane ruined tens of thousands, if not millions, of pages of paper files and charts in doctors' offices, clinics, and hospitals

across the region. When Katrina struck, hospitals could not send their records out of the region, and so evacuees had no documentation of their health conditions and drug regimens.

To help care for survivors, the U.S. government set up a central database of records at temporary shelters. In Houston, the Harris County Hospital District set up a 130,000-square-foot

clinic at the Astrodome and provided 80 computers to register storm victims and create new electronic medical records. As of September 9, the district said it had created records for more than 8,000 people. Despite such ad hoc clinics, most doctors had to start from scratch with individual patients.

State governments, not surprisingly, lag behind private industry in digitiz-

ing records. To enable Katrina evacuees to replace their driver's licenses, for example, local Department of Motor Vehicle offices checked Social Security numbers against the website of the Social Security administration.

By most accounts, Katrina left the Gulf Coast justice system in shambles. Mississippi and Louisiana court systems, like those of many other state governments, stored court files in the basements or lower levels of courthouses. As a result, both lost many records after Hurricane Katrina hit; records were washed away and, in most cases, there were no computer back-ups.

According to a report on *www.professorbrainbridge.com*, 5,000 to 6,000 lawyers in Louisiana – one-third of the state's lawyers – lost their offices, libraries, computers and all the information in them, and client files. The Louisiana State Supreme Court and Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals buildings were flooded, along with appellate files and evidence folders and boxes. The city and district courts in as many as eight parishes and three circuit courts were under water, meaning the evidence and files stored there were ruined. The law enforcement offices in those areas met the same fate.

According to *Newsweek*, there were 3,000 criminal cases in progress in New Orleans alone when Katrina struck, but now the district attorney might be forced to suspend many of those prosecutions because crucial evidence such as police reports, interview transcripts, fingerprints, and DNA samples were destroyed.

Help for Records Managers

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) sent a letter to the heads of federal agencies with records affected by the hurricane offering guidance and information regarding records recovery and records management to support agencies' business operations.

U.S. Archivist Allen Weinstein gave agency heads or their designees the authority to approve emergency dis-

posal of Katrina-ravaged records under the following conditions:

- The records are located in facilities affected by Katrina in Alabama, Mississippi, and/or Louisiana.
- The records have been contaminated by toxic chemicals, biological waste, or other forms of hazardous material, and the records pose a menace to health, life, or property.
- The records are scheduled and have a temporary disposition of 10 years or less.
- The information from the records is likely captured, at least in part, in other sources.

Agencies and NARA must both document the emergency destruction of records, so as part of the delegation of authority to agency heads, NARA requires the agency head or its designee who directed the records destruction to submit a written statement to NARA within 30 days. The letter should describe the records, their location and quantity, and the nature of the threat; affirm that the records were scheduled and had a temporary disposition of 10 years or less; and that the information from the records is likely captured in other sources.

The temporary delegations of authority outlined in NARA's letter expire December 31, 2005, at which time NARA will determine whether it needs to extend the authority delegation. In addition, the federal government has set up a website with instructions on replacing lost vital documents at *FirstGov.Gov*.

Preparing for the Next Disaster

Hurricane Katrina caused damage in the billions of dollars, destroyed houses and businesses, and took more than 1,000 lives. Many experts believe she may have also forever changed the way organizations of all kinds will do business in the future. In the wake of Katrina, relying on paper-based records – which are fragile and easily disintegrate in water, heat, and wind – seems terribly risky and out-of-date. Local leaders, volunteer organizations, and the federal government have in recent weeks called for the nation to move from paper records to electronic records that can be backed up, stored off-site, and easily moved to a safe place in the event of a disaster.

Being prepared for the next Katrina – and scientists say there *will* be a next time – should be mandatory for every business and government office everywhere. ■

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