

Hurricane fatigue wears on residents  
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By HARLAN KIRGAN

When Hurricane Ike's path included the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Paige Roberts, executive director of the Southeast Chapter of the American Red Cross, did the "call down" for volunteers to see who would be available.

Roberts said the number of people available to staff shelters dropped from Hurricane Gustav as would-be volunteers prepared to evacuate themselves.

Hurricane fatigue has definitely set in, she said as Ike's track veered toward Texas.

"We are tired to the point it is hard for us to think," Roberts said of the Red Cross staff that has been given a mandatory order from her to reclaim the Labor Day holiday lost to Gustav.

"The worst thing that can happen to us is we don't get rejuvenated," she said.

Jim Yancey, executive director of the Jackson County Community Services Coalition, said, "I'd say we are in that mode" when asked about fatigue from hurricanes.

The weather weariness lingers from Hurricane Katrina, he said.

"I had a doctor tell me at one of those meetings we are going to lose more people two to three years out than the day of the storm," Yancey said of Katrina.

A University of Mississippi study recently found that nearly one in five Gulf Coast residents likely experienced post-traumatic stress disorder because of Katrina.

A news release from the university on the study reported researcher Michael Hirschel, a UM doctoral student in psychology, said the level of post-traumatic stress disorder among the nearly 400 residents sampled appear higher than that of an average citizen. Hurricane Katrina claimed the lives of more than 1,500 people, the most fatalities from a hurricane since 1928, the news release said.

"In terms of PTSD prevalence, 19 percent responded in a manner suggesting a PTSD diagnosis as probable," Hirschel said. "This was a screening, not an in-depth interview process, so the total number of residents suffering from PTSD is unknown without additional follow-up."

PTSD is defined as a strong emotional response with specific symptoms as a result of an event perceived as life threatening, the news release said. Symptoms included flashbacks or dreams, avoidance of people or places associated with the event and increased arousal or trouble sleeping.

The study was conducted about five months after Katrina with 399 Hancock and Harrison county residents interviewed.

At a meeting with first responders a few weeks, it was reported that "one of the things we've noticed is domestic violence, crime, drug use and suicide are all up in the three counties on the Gulf Coast. So, something is causing that," Yancey said.

While rebuilding the infrastructure along the Gulf Coast is progressing, Yancey said the storm stresses for many people continue.

When Gustav approached, Yancey said a lawyer spoke of the work he had to do, "but couldn't concentrate on it."

Yancey said there are three steps to handle stress: Have a plan in place on whether to stay or leave; take care of today and learn to cope with the moment; and help someone else.

Symptoms of stress include a knot in the stomach, more headaches than normal, chest pains and lower back pains, he said. Eighty percent of illnesses are caused by stress, he said. "One of the keys to overcoming stress is to be disciplined to take care of yourself," he said.

With about 65,000 homes and businesses destroyed in Mississippi by Katrina, the recent evacuation from Louisiana through the coast served as a reminder of the destruction here, he said.

"Ask people when Katrina ended and see what answer you get," he said. "It hasn't ended for many people."

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