



Everything New Orleans

## **FEMA backs mental health program**

### **Money to be funneled to Louisiana Spirit**

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By James Varney

**Staff writer**

In the second-largest grant of its kind ever, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has earmarked more than \$34 million to finance mental health counseling in Louisiana for residents traumatized by Hurricane Katrina.

Only the \$132 million appropriated for mental health counseling in New York City after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks tops Thursday's grant, officials said. The money will be funneled first to the office of mental health within Louisiana's Department of Health and Hospitals, and then to an organization known as "Louisiana Spirit," which was set up by DHH for this purpose, according to a FEMA press release.

"We are very excited about the difference this grant will make in the complete recovery of residents of Louisiana," DHH Secretary Dr. Fred Cerise said.

A spokeswoman for Louisiana Spirit did not immediately return phone calls, but Bob Johannessen with DHH said the money will help pay for an existing hot line at (800) 273-8255, where people can call for help. To date, Louisiana Spirit has served 802,000 residents over the phone and in face-to-face encounters or e-mails, according to Johannessen.

The face-to-face encounters occur as an army of volunteers and trained professionals fans out across the storm-ravaged state seeking people who need help, according to Johannessen and FEMA officials. The grief counselors are combing travel trailer parks and other areas where those displaced by the storm are clustered, officials said.

And the need is great.

In an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association this month, two New Orleans psychiatrists who compiled statistics from a series of studies paint a bleak picture of residents' mental health.

About 80 percent of local psychiatrists have left town, according to one study they cited. A survey taken weeks after Katrina showed that nearly half the people interviewed for the study probably needed psychiatric help. Slightly more than one person in four in that poll said at least one household member needed counseling but that fewer than one person in 50 was getting help. Nearly half of the children in one poll reported depression, anxiety and sleep problems, according to JAMA, and suicides in Orleans Parish rose nearly threefold in the four months after the storm.

Johannessen noted, however, that those manning the hot line or conducting field interviews are not medical doctors. In addition, Louisiana Spirit, which also gets financing from the federal

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, does not pay for prescriptions or clinical treatments such as hospitalizations and other intensive and long-term treatment interventions.

FEMA agrees that the number of people who need grief counseling is vast. The agency said Thursday in its press release that, "everyone who was in the hurricane-affected area has been impacted by the stress of being subjected to the wrath of Hurricane Katrina."

In releases earlier this year touting the program, those considering contacting the hot line were assured by John Daniel, deputy executive director of Louisiana Spirit, that they would be afforded complete confidentiality.

"We recognize that many people who need crisis counseling sometimes do not take that step because they are concerned about the stigma associated with mental health problems," he said. "I want to assure those who are in need that this service will not result in a medical record in their name being established."

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