

## Mentally Disabled Faced Bias Post-Katrina

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Mentally ill hurricane evacuees were often discriminated against during relief efforts last year, to the point of being banished from shelters or institutionalized against their will, a government report says.

The National Council on Disability said Friday it was common practice after hurricanes Katrina and Rita to segregate people with psychiatric problems. The council called the segregation hurtful and illegal.

Some lived outside relief shelters. Others huddled in corners behind barriers and away from other people. Some were shipped to nursing homes, jails or mental institutions.

"Nobody deserves to be labeled as collateral damage simply because they are a person with a disability," said Jeff Rosen, the council's policy director.

The council makes recommendations to the government on how to enhance the quality of life for the disabled and their families.

Its report was particularly critical of the Red Cross.

"There is broad consensus ... that people with psychiatric disabilities encountered enormous problems with general shelters, especially those run by the American Red Cross," the report said.

But Red Cross officials disputed that assertion. "We help everybody regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or medical needs," said Mori Taheripur, vice president of corporate diversity.

Taheripur acknowledged, however, that there were problems after Hurricane Katrina.

At an April meeting in Washington that the Red Cross requested, it asked leaders of the disabled community for feedback on training materials for assisting people with disabilities.

Rosen said the Red Cross should have someone at the national level to ensure that people with disabilities are adequately cared for during a disaster. Local chapters often overlook the issue until it's too late, he said.

"There's no coordination. There's no consistency. There's very little guidance. When there are acts of discrimination or violation of Red Cross procedure, then there is nobody at headquarters with the authority to redirect that, to change that," Rosen said.

In its report, the council also cited shelter conditions that were often "crowded, noisy, confusing, and sometimes violent, all inadequate circumstances for a person with psychosis, anxiety or depression."

Hurricane Katrina produced massive flooding and led to more than 1,800 deaths and billions of dollars in damage.

During the relief efforts, shelters were established specifically for people with special needs, and at their peak they served nearly 10,000 people. But the shelters were created mainly for people with medical and physical disabilities, not psychiatric ones, the council said.

The council said the government's response to the mentally ill also was inadequate. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, for example, excluded people from its trailers because of concerns that psychiatric disabilities made them dangerous, the report said.

Among the council's recommendations:

\_Evacuation planners should track the transfer of residents from group homes and psychiatric facilities, and ensure the residents can contact family members and caretakers.

\_People with mental illness should be included in disaster planning and relief planning.

\_A single office or official should be made responsible and accountable for helping the disabled during recovery and relief efforts.

The council also asked Congress to clarify "Good Samaritan" legislation that would encourage doctors to volunteer and treat patients during a mass disaster without fear they could be sued.