

## **In Post-Katrina New Orleans Area, Mental Health Facilities Distressingly Scarce**

By Jaime Guillet

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Six months after Hurricane Katrina, inpatient mental health treatment facilities and options in the New Orleans area are distressingly scarce, medical professionals say. The outlook isn't good, said Joe Eppling, director of psychiatry at East Jefferson General Hospital. There was a mental health crisis before the storm in terms of beds and now we're in even more of a crisis than before. Four of the 12 mental health inpatient facilities in the metropolitan area pre-Katrina - DePaul Tulane Behavioral Health Center, Medical Center of Louisiana, Touro Infirmary and Kindred Hospital - remain closed.

Eight hundred beds remain in service out of 1,068, a 25-percent decrease. New Orleans Adolescent Hospital has relocated to the state psychiatric hospital in East Feliciana Parish. Officials say the most dramatic deficiency is the loss of psychiatrists and full-time employees. EJGH is consistently full and turns away patients daily because of a lack of beds, Eppling said. Many area nursing homes have not reopened, reducing the number of referral alternatives for EJGH and other centers. When River Oaks (Hospital) opened it gave us some breathing room. Then they got full and it got tight again, said Eppling. Community Care Hospital, one of two adult facilities open in Orleans Parish, is also stretched thin. Administrator Clara Hollis calls the mental health situation in New Orleans guarded. New Orleans mental health services have been dramatically affected, said Hollis. It's been extremely difficult since the storm. We've not had to turn anyone away but we have remained pretty full. Hollis and Eppling say indigent care increased dramatically subsequent to the storm. We had a fair number of poor and working poor before the storm, said Hollis. Post-storm, the (number of) uninsured is even greater because so many people back have lost jobs and therefore insurance. Hollis said post-traumatic stress disorder has not accounted for a dramatic increase in patients but she believes the facilities will treat more PTSD cases over time. Dr. Dudley Stewart, a private-practice psychiatrist and representative in the Louisiana Psychiatric Medical Association, said things will get worse before they get better as drug overdoses and alcohol abuse become more apparent in the community. There's really nothing left and (people) are going to have to go to some other community (for treatment), said Stewart. Stewart said he is optimistic his colleagues will return. Mental health professionals say storm-affected residents should also find support from within their established community, whether it is a family physician, relative, clergy member or a support group. There's a lot of things we can do to use our already-in-place coping mechanisms, said Stewart.

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