



Help and Healing for
Victims of Violence

Hurricane Gustav: Residents Already Experiencing Retraumatization Mental Health Impact Significant

Washington, DC (August 31, 2008)

On the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, residents of the Gulf Coast are bracing for the very serious Hurricane Gustav. Already, even days ago, the emotional impact of yet another very serious storm could be seen and heard with area residents.

The stress of another storm can be seen in the anxiety, worry, and loss that residents display as they evacuate home for a place of safety.

A few key notes about the mental health impact of the storm and its timing:

- Anniversaries of traumatic events, in and of themselves, can be difficult and triggering.
- Leaving home - a place of safety and consistent routine - can make the mental health challenges even more significant.
- The risk of experiencing the loss of home, personal possessions, and more creates intense anxiety and fear. This is compounded for residents in the Gulf Coast who have spent much of the past three years trying to rebuild what they lost from Hurricane Katrina.
- Those responding to aid during and after the storm - National Guard and Red Cross providers - are also prone to retraumatization.

People experiencing retraumatization may respond with isolation, hypervigilance, substance abuse, dissociation, self-injury, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, hearing voices, and risky sexual behavior. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there was a significant rise in domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and substance abuse, as well as trauma-related mental health concerns like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

"We need to recognize that regardless of the natural destruction of this storm, the traumatic impact is

already being felt" commented Helga West, President & CEO of Witness Justice. "The people in the Gulf Coast need immediate, intermediate, and long-term support, including peer support, to get through yet another significant and traumatic event."

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THE TRAUMATIC IMPACT OF DISASTERS

Witness Justice, along with dozens of experts and providers around the country, participated in the After the Crisis initiative following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to address the mental health impact of disasters. [White papers and other information](#) were created as a starting point to identify key gaps in service and understanding and to prompt responses that would address those needs. After the Crisis was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Mental Health Services.

Witness Justice is a national nonprofit organization providing advocacy and support to survivors of violence and trauma. For more information, visit www.WitnessJustice.org.

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