



## *Leading the way for Louisiana recovery*

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# CR: An Innovative Approach to Assisting Disaster Survivors

Disaster response ... is there a better way to do it? An innovative approach? A greater number of resources? When it comes to serving survivors, the answer is always yes, yes and yes!

After Hurricane Isaac pummeled Louisiana, FEMA Region 6 and state leadership, together with External Affairs, launched one of the most in-depth regional efforts to date to respond to survivors and determine their immediate needs. The result was a massive rollout of more than 300 Community Relations (CR) specialists. Their mission? [Blanket hurricane-affected neighborhoods](#), quickly assess the situation and report in real time to the FCO, SCO and the individual programs.

To quickly staff up CR, FEMA leadership seized the opportunity to use resources already on the ground -- personnel from the Louisiana Recovery Office. With those folks, along with regional staff and Reservists, nearly half of the 300-plus-member CR team was assembled. The deployment by FEMA HQ of some 150 more specialists helped to meet the required demand.

"Our CR teams serve as the eyes and ears of FEMA on the ground to see and hear first-hand the survivors' critical needs. With that information, we can do our best to satisfy their particular needs," said Merideth Parrish, CR assistant external affairs officer during the rollout.

Going door to door throughout the 24-parish area designated for IA, and speaking with survivors at shelters, points of distribution, places of worship, community events and anywhere else they could be found, [CR teams met with thousands of Louisianians](#) over the first month of the response and recovery effort.

The teams quickly assessed individual and community needs, noting where survivors lacked basic commodities and which neighborhoods were flooded, lacked power or were inaccessible due to debris or downed power lines. They also reported on areas that had functioning medical centers, grocery stores and restaurants. Every step of the way, they kept the parish emergency managers and FEMA division supervisors informed of their movements.

Occasionally, a situation required immediate attention at the expense of the reporting step. For example, CR team members canvassing one Lafourche Parish neighborhood were invited into the home of an elderly woman who wore an oxygen-fed breathing mask -- and immediately noticed



the strong odor of gas fumes. The specialists calmly asked the woman to step outside, and then they called local firefighters. Because the woman had breathing assistance, she had not noticed the gas leak. The firefighters said a single spark could have caused an explosion. The team was credited with helping to prevent a tragedy in the parish.

To meet the needs of the whole community, CR/Private Sector strike teams were formed to reach out to disaster-affected businesses and to survivors who often are underserved following a disaster. Rita Ramos, strike team lead, said the teams assessed the needs of survivors with disabilities or communication and access needs. For example, they identified more than 10 language needs, including French, Creole, Spanish, Vietnamese and Cambodian. External Affairs then used this information to produce fliers in several of the languages and to provide broadcast interviews in Spanish and Vietnamese.

Strike-team members also worked with public officials. At a town hall meeting hosted by U.S. Rep. Bill Cassidy in Livingston Parish, the teams brought laptops and guided survivors who needed help through the registration process.

As the CR mission begins to wind down in Louisiana, leadership is compiling the best practices and lessons learned into a final report -- so the next time CR rolls out in Region 6 the teams can build on this mission's successes.