

ESTRANGED IN A STRANGE LAND

Hurricane Katrina has been a story told in Black and White, obscuring the fate of thousands of immigrants living and working in the Gulf states.

The largest immigrant groupings in the region are Latino and Vietnamese, many employed in the poultry and shrimp industries. There are approximately 30,000 Vietnamese who call Louisiana home; roughly half of those have fled to Houston. The Mexican consular offices estimates that there were 40,000 Mexican citizens in Louisiana, mostly in New Orleans. There are also approximately 150,000 Hondurans and 9,600 Salvadorans in the larger region.

“Immigrants are only 2 percent of the population in those states, but that’s still tens of thousands of people,” notes Josh Bernstein, federal policy director at the National Immigration Law Center (NILC).

Bernstein reports that immigrants have experienced a number of unique problems. One has been a lack of translators at the evacuee centers and at FEMA stations. And many immigrants who have been in the US for a longer time, and are naturalized citizens, are minus the documents that prove their status.

In addition, Citizenship and Immigration Service agents were deployed as part of the public safety patrols. “They were actually there for benign reasons,” says Bernstein, “but it was still terrifying to undocumented immigrants.”

Undocumented workers are also fearful that seeking assistance might lead to arrest and deportation. Mexican President Vicente Fox said that the U.S. had agreed not to prosecute undocumented individuals at this time, and they have been urged to seek aid; and the consulate has set up mobile offices in Houston to assist with this effort.

In addition, people who have work permits based on jobs that no longer exist, are now potentially subject to deportation. The job front also presents dicey issues for day laborers. Reports that firms are scooping up day laborers in Houston to work on clean up efforts in Louisiana. “Honestly, I’m worried about health and equipment issues,” said one local observer. And a recent Associated Press story by Eduardo Castillo reported that undocumented workers in Biloxi MS are seeking temporary visas. As one of the workers commented, “If we are working and helping to raise this city, at least they should give us a work visa.”

The Department of Homeland Security has said that, since so many people have lost proof of citizenship due to the storm, there would be a 45-day grace period during which employers would not be penalized for hiring undocumented workers. As such, hiring undocumented workers for cleanup is fueling a hostile anti-immigrant blogs.

NILC recommends the following provisions to help immigrants displaced after the hurricane:

- **For Persons on Nonimmigrant Visas (Other Than Tourist Visas)**
Automatic extension of lawful status until Aug. 26, 2006, or current duration of status, whichever is longer.

Regular work authorization (not limited to any particular employer or type of employment) during this period.

- **For Lawfully Present Immigrants**
Make changes necessary to ensure that non-citizens do not lose immigration benefits as a consequence of losses caused by Hurricane Katrina.

Expedited issuance of temporary documents to replace lost work authorization credentials.

During a two-year period, ensure that lawfully present immigrant hurricane victims have immediate access to critical benefits such as Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and waive any public charge implications for the use of such assistance.

- **For Refugees**
Make changes necessary to ensure continuity of refugee services and to prevent disruption of the refugee resettlement program.
- **For All People, Citizens and Immigrants Alike**
Provide resources to overcome language isolation and fear.
 - Ensure that interpretation, translation of written materials, and community outreach and education are in the predominant languages of victims.
 - Reassure communities that disaster-related assistance will not be used as a basis for immigration enforcement.

Expedited procedures for obtaining benefits.