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Lessons for Katrina Found in Valdez Spill

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On Wednesday the U.S. Supreme Court began hearing the case against Exxon Corp. regarding its liability in the Valdez oil-spill disaster in Prince William Sound, Alaska, almost 19 years after the fact.

Though there's no way to know if Katrina insurance litigation will draw out as long or as painfully, some social scientists do want to point out the lessons learned by that ongoing disaster and apply them to the Gulf Coast's physical and mental recovery.

"True community recovery lies in perceptions -- the mental health and social quality of life of survivors," said Steve Picou, a University of South Alabama researcher and self-described practical sociologist. Picou has been following the mental and physical health of Prince William Sound residents since the spill in

an ongoing series of interactive community surveys.

"We've moved into a more complex pattern of (post-disaster community) impacts that we need to have new ideas in terms of interventions. It's a formidable challenge to traditional emergency response and traditional mental-health services."

Picou pointed out in a recent interview it took many Alaskans years to even show symptoms from the disaster; a rash of suicides related to slow recovery did not occur until four years later.

Picou said he plans to apply lessons he's learned to a newly funded set of surveys and community-resiliency exercises in South Mississippi and greater New Orleans. His efforts will include attempts at helping survey participants find real solutions to the myriad problems they'll face in the coming years.

On the surface, the dozen or so other mental-health studies released or under way seem to be little more than academic exercises. But many, like the National Institutes of Health-funded, Harvard-based Hurricane Katrina Community Advisory Group, seek to avoid making the subjects feel like guinea pigs by offering some solutions to their woes. Problems remain, though; many subjects said in recent interviews reaping real-world benefits is not straightforward.

Sorting through those problems remains an imperfect art, Picou said.

"We all have trials and tribulations in our lifetime, but when people are put in a situation where their future is uncertain, what we learned about those civic institutions being there for us -- when that fails, they have a hard time functioning in a sustainable manner for long periods of time," Picou said. "That uncertainty leads to stress and of course stress leads to various types of problems in day-to-day life."

Picou said he created a series of surveys that not only asked Alaskans how they were doing, but how the surveyors could help. The result was a reduction in uncertainty as community-support groups formed and resources were found. He called it "give hugs not shrugs."

Others, like Ronald Kessler, the Harvard professor heading the Katrina Advisory Group, say their experiences after disasters such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 have shown the need to get a firmer grasp on the social and mental needs of disaster-affected populations.

"We're learning more and more of the high level of unmet needs of the people of this population," Kessler said. "That information is being fed to Congress so they can make rational decisions on how to allocate resources. We think that what we're doing is very useful at the moment. It's a spitting-in-the-ocean kind of thing."

KAG has a core of a little more than 1,000 participants from across the storm-affected region, local and displaced, who will be interviewed about once a year or so over a five-year period regarding their mental state and unmet needs.

The results of the KAG surveys have been eye-opening for many; of the many published studies out there, they are the most cited in news reports and congressional actions.

The results from KAG's most recent survey, published in the Archives of General Psychology, found nearly half of participants displayed some kind of mood disorder. Though the overall prevalence of mood disorders did not rise significantly between the first two post-Katrina surveys, the overall level of unmet needs did. In other words, people were bad to begin with but did not get worse per se, but those who were bad off to begin with are having a harder time finding help. Still, the things stressing people overall were found not to have improved significantly.

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When surveyors hear something not right in the participants, they immediately offer to assist in finding help.

Some survey participants -- such as Shaun Chambers, currently displaced from New Orleans in South Carolina -- said the surveys are sometimes more than just simple questions and answers.

"I don't really want to say it was invasive, it just brought up some disturbing memories," said Chambers. "I don't know, at certain times it was like rubbing salt into the wound. They seem to have a lot of questions but no ideas or solutions."

Kessler said he was surprised to hear that, considering how many resources the group offers on its Web site and over the phone.

Other survey participants -- such as Beth Mumme, displaced from Bay St. Louis to Ohio -- said participating in the survey can be cathartic.

"In a way it was kind of an honor that I was able to have a voice in some sense," Mumme said. "I was surprised."

After taking part in one round of the survey, Mumme said she realized based on the questions that one of her daughters may have been displaying post-traumatic stress symptoms. That prompted a few trips to the psychologist and eventually her daughter was feeling better.

Taking part in the KAG survey and reflecting on her storm story has allowed Mumme and her family to gain the kind of perspective and peace people like Kessler and Picou hope all on the Coast will eventually have.

Maintaining that peace in an often-sluggish recovery process is the challenge, Picou said, pointing to the ongoing Valdez disaster.

"You need all the help you can get to get over a disaster like Katrina," he said.

"Like Valdez, it has economic implications, lifestyle implications. It really takes a toll on everyone."

Source: The Sun Herald

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