



August 3, 2008

Volunteers advance on Iowa's muck

By *MARY CHALLENGER*
mchallen@dmreg.com

As a job description, it's the furthest thing from glamorous.

Mucking out.

The name suggests close encounters with slimy mud, stinking sewage and rotting and decomposing household goods.

Yet thousands of volunteers are streaming into Iowa's flood- and tornado-damaged towns weekly, eager for the opportunity to don protective masks and gloves and do battle with the swollen carcasses of skunky sofas, drenched carpets and mold-flecked drywall that stand in the way of homeowners rebuilding their lives.

After a slow start that elevated residents' frustration levels in some communities, work seems to be proceeding quickly.

Julie Struck, AmeriCorps program officer for the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service, estimates more than 100 organizations - including American Baptist Men, Church World Services, the Latter Day Saints, Christian Disaster Relief, Christian Aid Ministries, Mercy Response, Mennonite Disaster Services, World Hope International and Hands-on Disaster Response, a nonfaith-based organization out of Massachusetts - have contributed to the cleanup process and more are coming in daily.

To keep them all from tripping over each other, six volunteer reception centers have been established in the hardest-hit areas of Parkersburg, Waverly, Oakville, Cedar Rapids, and Johnson and Black Hawk counties, and a statewide Web site, www.flood2008.iowa.gov, is helping match willing workers with individuals and communities that need a hand.

"We've had a really good influx," said Melissa Simmermaker, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer working at the Parkersburg reception center. "We've had anywhere from 50 to 150 people per day and we've been getting phone calls daily from people wanting to come in August. Right now, we're doing the last rake-through of people's yards. We can't start rebuilding until all the debris is gone."

Seth Gardner, the 26-year-old director of the Minneapolis-based Nechama Jewish Response to Disaster, answered a call nearly seven weeks ago for sandbaggers.

He's still here, helping coordinate volunteer efforts in the Waverly area, where about 450 homes were damaged.

With two paid team leaders, a rotating supply of volunteers and two equipment trailers filled with supplies such as masks, gloves, crowbars and pressure washers, his group has helped muck out more than 200 homes.

Some days they have as many as 50 volunteers working with them, other days fewer than a handful. Usually, they labor side by side with the homeowners.

Named after the Hebrew word for comfort, Gardner said, Nechama was inspired by the 1993 flood in Des Moines. He was 16 when he started with the group as a volunteer.

The group's work in Waverly is nearing an end, but Gardner pledges Nechama will remain in town until the last damaged home's flooded contents have been removed, the drywall stripped and the interior pressure-washed and sanitized.

Similar results are being reported in disaster-stricken communities across Iowa, said Struck.

Even residents of Oakville, a town whose obituary has already been written by many, are feeling a little more optimistic these days, thanks to the presence of members of AmeriCorps volunteers from Washington and Minnesota.

"For the first three weeks I was here, it was pretty shaky," admitted Perry Onorio, a 26-year-old member of AmeriCorps Washington Conservation Corps who is serving as volunteer coordinator in Oakville. "There wasn't a lot getting done. But right now we have 40 more AmeriCorps people sent in from the governor, and we're getting crews from all over. I'm really hoping to have all the homes cleaned out and gutted by the end of next week so we can start the rebuilding process in the next month or so."

Onorio said on an average day between 70 and 90 volunteers are at work in the town. In addition to sending volunteers, church groups have also been sending donations to local hardware stores for much-needed tools such as crowbars and wheelbarrows, he said.

A former television production coordinator in Los Angeles who now lives in Olympia, Onorio has become an expert in coordinating volunteer schedules. He said it takes about a day or day and a half for a crew of 10 to finish gutting a home.

His favorite part of the job, Onorio said, is making follow-up calls, when residents tell him how much work the volunteers accomplished and how appreciative they are.

The part he hates is when he has to tell flood victims that their homes are too dangerous for volunteers to be allowed in and they will either need to have them torn down or do the work themselves.

"That's really heartbreaking," he said.

In Cedar Rapids, more than 2,200 volunteers have passed through the East Central Iowa Volunteer Reception Center since it opened July 3.

But AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer Ron Jackson said a daunting amount of work remains. So far, volunteers have managed to muck out about 250 homes. Jackson said his latest report from the field indicates a minimum of 2,000 houses still in need of being cleared out and sanitized.

"There's definitely still a great need for volunteers," he said. "We keep files of requests and they come in every day. At any time, we have 100 houses waiting that need help. We can take as many volunteers as we can get. One group said they could easily take another 100 volunteers."

Cleaning up flooded and tornado-damaged properties in Iowa is just the first phase of recovery. After that comes the rebuilding.

It took tens of thousands of hours of volunteer labor to get the state to this point.

All involved in the recovery process agree that it could take years of sustained effort to restore some communities to their pre-flood status.

Leslie Schaffer, executive director of the American Red Cross' central Iowa Chapter, said she has been involved in a series of meetings over the past few weeks with all the different groups likely to play a role in the rebuilding, from United Way to the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee.

The goal is simple: Identify what the needs are, identify what resources are available, and match them.

The reality of putting back together tens of thousands of shattered lives is much more complicated.

In Clarksville, a town of 1,441 northwest of Waterloo experiencing major flooding for the first time in most residents' memories, much of the initial cleanup work was done by locals, said councilman Jeff Kolb.

"We put out a local call for assistance in helping flood victims removing debris, and we had farmers and people with skid loaders coming in to help," he said. "I don't know if it's Midwest ethics, but you just do what you need to do. People don't always go ask for help - they just step up to the plate and do it."

But Kolb, who is also economic development director for Butler County, where Parkersburg is located, isn't sure rebuilding is something his community can tackle on its own.

In Clarksville, he said, about 150 of the 540 homes and businesses in town were damaged. Since none of the homes affected were in the 100-year flood plain, he doubts if any had flood insurance.

Many of the flood victims are elderly, he says, and not at a stage in their lives where they can readily take out a mortgage to rebuild.

"Any volunteer help will save them money," he said. "Any volunteer help would be greatly appreciated."

The same is true in Oakville, where Onorio thinks a steady supply of volunteer labor could be the difference between the town surviving or folding.

"A lot of these people don't have the money themselves to rebuild," he said. "It all depends on donations of money and labor. If that happens, a lot of these people will rebuild. It seems a good third of people want to stay, a third probably won't and a third want to see what happens with everyone else before they make their decision."

Struck said donations of materials will be almost as vital as labor in the weeks and months ahead. Everything from hammers to drywall to floor tile to Tyvek suits are needed, she said. Several agencies are in the process of setting up a warehouse in Ankeny to accept and distribute donations of building materials and other donated goods.

Dan Kittle, director of Wartburg College's Center for Community Engagement, which is coordinating volunteer efforts in the Waverly area, said even some flood victims who turned down assistance initially are now asking for help.

"The people who live it every single day are exhausted," he said. "When you have people who come in from Minnesota or Michigan, they not only provide another hand to help, but they give those people living here a break."

Besides, although it's fine to think of rebuilding as a multi-year process, Kittle said, many cases are far more urgent.

"People need to get back in safe circumstances before winter hits," he said. "There's people here that are living in tents right now in their backyards."
