

WORKS

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Restructuring Fails to Garner Congressional Approval

By Rachel H. Shonfield, Local 3599

When you were little you probably first heard the story, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In short, the Emperor had no clothes at all. But as the Emperor paraded by in his birthday suit, all of his ‘yes-men’ minions acted in awe of his new wardrobe. Likewise, when you look at the EEOC’s restructuring plan, there’s nothing

there. The powers that be at the EEOC have spent much time telling us why our old duds are out of style, but instead of updating our look they’re just stripping us down, i.e., downgrading offices. We’re not asking for bling, just the essentials. Will EEOC’s plan get us more frontline staff? More support staff? Updated technology?

How about a receptionist? The answers are a resounding- NO.

Only because EEOC’s restructuring plan has failed thus far to get Congressional approval, the agency has finally sat down at the table with the Union. However, rather than assuaging the Union’s concerns, these meetings have further demonstrated that the agency’s plan is threadbare. For instance, under the plan many offices are gaining territory from downgraded offices, but not gaining resources to assist with the extra work. Take Ohio: Under the restructuring plan, the Cleveland office will be downgraded, with part of its territory reassigned to the much smaller Cincinnati Area office. Cincinnati will also extend its boundaries into Kentucky. However, in the Union’s meetings with the Agency, there were no assurances that Cincinnati would get more employees to address the larger workload. The Union also learned that the agency has officially stopped hiring receptionists. This is just further proof that the plan ignores the reality on the ground.

Unlike the Emperor’s new clothes, most people are just not playing along. Where are the ringing endorsements that this is a well thought out plan that will further the EEOC’s civil rights enforcement mission? Where is the public outcry that EEOC did not implement its plan on October 1? It’s just the opposite. GAO, the civil rights community and key members of Congress have all expressed concerns about the plan and the process that produced the plan. This is because, they have figured out that the plan is not about saving money with less SES directors. The plan is really about downsizing an already tiny civil rights agency. It may not be pretty, but like the Emperor showing off his nonexistent new wardrobe: that’s the naked truth.

PRESIDENT’S VIEWPOINT



*Gabrielle Martin,
Council President*

Thanksgiving has come and gone. We now are officially in the “Holiday Season.” People take time off from the busy year to rest, spend time with family and friends, as well as to prepare for the new year. Each of us should also take time to reflect on two things.

First, this year has been trying, but we have been able to accomplish a number of things. With respect to the agency reorganization, we have been able to expose the EEOC’s plan for what it is—an attempt to make the agency less efficient, less effective and less customer service oriented. It is a plan without very much thought having been given to how it can or will work. When questions are asked, the response still echoes that there is no plan for how things will work and that no thought will be given to those questions until the reorganization is approved. We also have had EEOC called on the carpet to explain its proposal and the gaps in it. The plan has yet to receive Congressional approval, I think due to the agency’s less than forthright and less than forthcoming answers to questions that have been raised. In addition, we have been able to impact the appropriations process and have been able to keep our Congressional appropriators more interested in how EEOC spends its money. This is an activity we want to ensure continues in the coming years.

Next, the employees of our New Orleans office suffered through the destruction wrought by Katrina and her aftermath. Many have been displaced since Katrina came to town. On November 29, 2005, many of those employees will have returned to work in new office space. For a number of those employees, the family home no longer exists, or is not in a livable condition. Some still live in hotels or other “temporary” accommodations. So, as we go about our lives, let us not forget them. They are our brothers and sisters. Let us reach out to them to send a special hello and message of the season as they return to work and rebuild.

As we recognize that yet another year has come and soon will be gone, take time to renew yourselves, enjoy your families and the season. Remember too, your union brothers and sisters. We have been there for each other this year. Let us continue next year to build on our progress, our brotherhood and sisterhood.

Selflessness of EEOC Employees

In October, 2005, it was announced that EEOC personnel could volunteer to provide aid in the hurricane ravaged Gulf States. To date, 22 EEOC employees have been deployed to FEMA to work in those areas for approximately one month. Those who volunteered numbered well beyond the 22 so far deployed. These EEOC employees were willing to put their own lives on hold to assist others clearly demonstrating that helping others is more than a seasonal practice among EEOC employees. Here is a taste of those experiences.

EEOC Employees Volunteer; Detailed to FEMA

*By Benjamin Nidus, Investigator,
Boston Area Office*

They came to the hurricane stricken Gulf Coast expecting to sleep in tents and eat MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Instead the ten EEOC volunteers to FEMA, slept in hotels and ate at places like the Waffle House and Chick-Fil-A. The volunteers represented different positions at the EEOC, such as Investigator, Mediator, Administrative Judge, and Supervisor. They were assigned, two volunteers per state, in the position of Equal Rights Officers to Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, where they assisted FEMA employees. Volunteers committed to assignments of at least 30 days with some staying longer. Initially, the volunteers were sent for three days of FEMA training and orientation at FEMA's Long Term Recovery Center in Orlando Florida. During orientation, the EEOC volunteers learned about FEMA operational procedures, FEMA history, and also spent a day in more specific FEMA Equal Rights Officer training. They also learned about FEMA's complex lexicon of acronyms. In fact, FEMA has so many acronyms that it produces its own acronym dictionary known as the "fat book" – and yes, it is fat.

FEMA, now part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, is tasked with responding to, planning for, recovering from and mitigating against disasters. The work the volunteers did was to assist FEMA's Equal Rights Officers with carrying out their duties and, in a sense, became "deputy" Equal Rights Officers themselves. In some ways, the work was similar to that done in the enforcement division of the EEOC. Complaints of discrimination and harassment in the workplace were looked into and attempts were made to resolve the complaints informally. EEO training was given to other FEMA employees, and contract hires, so they would be aware of their rights under

anti-discrimination statutes. Other aspects of the job involved dealing with possible civil rights issues, such as equal access to services provided by FEMA, in such areas as housing. This involved making sure that housing was accessible to the disabled and distributed to recipients in accordance with federal civil rights law. It also involved helping to ensure that those affected by the disaster received equitable, unbiased inspections of their homes and property by FEMA contracted inspectors. The Equal Rights Officers, including the EEOC volunteers, also attended meetings of different departments within FEMA, such as the Community Relations Department, and gave advice and assistance when relevant to the different departments within FEMA.

The assignments also involved long hours, sometimes up to 14 hours a day. Saturday was a workday, and Equal Rights Officers often traveled long distances within their assigned states. In some cases, the EEOC volunteers got to observe firsthand the tremendous devastation and destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

All the FEMA employees I worked with through the course of my assignment were classified as either Disaster Assistance Employees (DAEs) or local hires. The DAE employees came from a variety of different work backgrounds and had been all over the United States and the trust territories working on temporary disaster assignments. In fact, many FEMA DAE employees knew each other from working together on different disasters.

Recovery will be a long road ahead for the survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as for their communities. Help will be needed for some time to come. Although FEMA has taken a bad rap in the media for its role in the disaster response and recovery, the dedication, skill, and compassion that I observed

among FEMA employees was truly commendable.

I think I speak for all the volunteers when I say that the experience was an interesting and rewarding one for us. Asking other federal agencies to temporarily loan out their employees to assist is a relatively new idea at FEMA and I hope the program is continued in the future. Hopefully, FEMA is now aware that it can count on help from the EEOC should the need ever arise in the future.

NEVER THE SAME

This was written two weeks after Katrina. Two weeks after Katrina, my family departed to different cities for various reasons but most of all for survival.

*Madoline Bealer, Investigator,
Formerly of the New Orleans
District Office Now working in the
Dallas District Office*

**Water, water everywhere
You raised your head many
times before
Made us go far and near only
to return for another year
Never made us cry
Then came Katrina
So fast, so high
You blew your top
You made us cry
You made us weep
You brought us to our knees
You sent us far and near as fast
as you could
You broke our hearts
You sent us far and near to
places we've never been
Separated us one and all
Never to be the same again!**

Alabama Feels the Effects of Storms

By Christa Zamora, Administrative Judge, Chicago District Office

I came back from Alabama about November 14. I was based in Montgomery, Alabama and spent most of my time at FEMA's Joint Field Office ("JFO"). My title was Equal Rights Officer (ERO). When I found out I was going to be in Alabama, I was somewhat surprised, since, from my understanding, there was not much hurricane damage. I learned that my initial understanding was true, the hurricane damage was minute compared to Louisiana and Mississippi. However, Alabama was unique in that a lot of people from Louisiana and Mississippi fled/came to Alabama for shelter and aid.

The state has offered 14 state parks for evacuees to use. The evacuees are staying in travel trailers provided by FEMA. There are also two interim housing facilities - one in Anniston and the other in Birmingham. Anniston is an old army base and Birmingham is a renovated hospital. The majority of the people that I met were from New Orleans. Evacuees are also staying at hotels/motels throughout the state. I believe at last count, there are about 53,000 evacuees in Alabama.

I met people from New Orleans' 9th Ward and from other areas of New Orleans. Almost three months after the hurricanes, there was still the sense of, "What am I going to do?" Some of the people I met were waiting for FEMA to try to solve that issue for them, which is not what FEMA is meant to do. Others were still awaiting aid and others were still in shock that they had lost everything. Some, however, were ready to get on with their lives and had purchased homes or were awaiting places to live on a more permanent basis. Though the media may portray the hurricane victims as being angry, and some are, there's also a sense of gratitude, for the help that FEMA has given them

and for some of the smaller things in life. One of the things that I helped do was serve food at three of FEMA's outreach events throughout the state of Alabama. People were thankful for just being served and getting a scoop of coleslaw (although the coleslaw did not look that good!)

The hours were not as strenuous as advertised. Rather than 12 hour shifts, I worked 9 hour shifts 6 days a week, with the occasional 10 -12 hour work days. For the days that went long, it was usually due to driving to different areas of Alabama where meetings were held. For example, I went to York, Alabama which was a three hour drive from Montgomery to attend a long term recovery meeting with community members. FEMA hopes to create long term recovery committees consisting of community organizations which will be able to serve the needs of the hurricane survivors after FEMA leaves.

When I was not out in the field, I was in FEMA's joint field office in Montgomery, Alabama. While there, I attended various meetings in the office, including individual assistance meetings, mobile home operations, and voluntary agency liaison meetings. I was also able to sit in on meetings relating to removing shrimp boats in Bayou La Batre.

Of the towns that were worst hit in Alabama, Bayou La Batre is perhaps the worst. It is a small town consisting of about 2300 people, 30% of those are of Asian descent, mostly Vietnamese. Bayou La Batre is a town whose economy is based on the shrimp and fishing industry. Due to the hurricane, almost 70 boats were swept ashore. 22 boats were stranded on one property alone! The issue before FEMA was whether these boats were within FEMA jurisdiction to remove, and once removed, how to discard them.

Another Perspective

By Veronica Villalobos, Attorney, Office of Federal Operations, HQ

The following has been excerpted from remarks Veronica made before the Commissioners on November 17, 2005.

In mid-October, ten EEOC employees, including myself, were deployed to FEMA. We received 2 ½ days of training in Orlando and were then deployed to Gulf states, including Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida. I was sent to Houston and worked as an Equal Rights Officer (ERO).

Much of my efforts were focused on outreach to the Hispanic and foreign born communities in Houston, and the disabled community in East Texas, including Beaumont, Port Arthur, Galveston, Crystal Beach, Orange, Vidor, and Livingston. We worked through agencies such as the Houston Mayor's Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs to ensure that eligible individuals were receiving the full scope of FEMA services. The Vietnamese community was among those greatly affected by Hurricane Katrina. FEMA circulated literature in Spanish and Vietnamese and worked on methods of clearly communicating information about FEMA assistance and providing these individuals with opportunities to register for benefits other than in the Disaster Recovery Centers, such as churches.

In the disabled community, community organizations and pastors would provide names and phone numbers of individuals with special needs. The survivors' requests varied. One applicant needed assistance registering for a "Blue Roof" (temporary roof); another urgently needed an inspector where her wheelchair ramp had been torn away from her mobile home; still others required trailers that were accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Interestingly, my work in the community was made easier because I am an employee of EEOC. When I would meet individuals in the community, they would ask me how long I had worked for FEMA, and I would explain I was an EEOC employee on detail to FEMA. They appeared to be familiar with the work of Commission because they almost always responded with an instant openness and sense of hope. Their expectation added an

Continued on page 4

The Call Center: A Present From the Grinch

Since the National Call Center opened last February the National Council of EEOC Locals, No. 216, AFGE, AFL-CIO has had an employee survey posted on its website, www.council216.org. The Call Center has continued to add redundant work to employees' workloads. More anecdotal horror stories will appear in the next issue of *216 Works*.

Storm Survivors Appreciated Person-to-Person Contact

Continued from page 3

even greater measure of responsibility to all my efforts.

I regularly commuted to Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) in East Texas and monitored for civil rights violations and/or employment discrimination. Once at the DRC, I conducted an ADA review to ensure that the facilities were accessible to individuals with disabilities, and that individuals' reasonable accommodation needs were met. I made every effort to develop good relationships with the DRC managers and staff, because, through them, I gained information about the climate in the community and whether applicants had special needs or concerns. While at the DRCs, we trained FEMA employees and contract employees on EEO, the work of the Equal Rights Office, sexual harassment, and diversity.

My favorite part of going out to the DRCs was the opportunity to speak with the survivors and gauge their level of comfort with FEMA's efforts. Every person had a heart wrenching story. These people had lost everything, and so many weeks after the disasters, they continued to struggle with many things we take for granted, like where they were going to be living and whether their homes were even still standing. Survivors relayed experiences regarding the difficulties and discriminatory experiences amidst the suffering of the entire community. One elderly woman was in fear because her local government informed her that her home, in which she was still living, would be demolished if not brought up to code. Hurricane Rita had not leveled her home, but she expected that the local government would. Another disabled woman sat in front of me with tears streaming down her face, and she said, "I am one of the lucky ones because I had insurance. I have the financial wherewithal, but I have lost everything." I was deeply touched as many survivors described the discrimination they suffered in the housing sector and from businesses.

One thing was very evident from these

meetings – the survivors appreciated the person-to-person contact. After long waits I would mention the FEMA 800 number and the website, but all of them said they preferred to talk to a FEMA employee face-to-face.

The one lesson I came away with is that the burden falls on each of us to make what small differences we can in these devastated communities. Even the small act of donating can make a difference in a person's life. I recall one man at the Urban League walking around and asking anyone who would listen, "Do you know where I can get a pair of size 10 men's shoes?" Every little bit really does help.

Katrina and Rita survivors need our continued support. Although the survivors' stories are no longer on the front pages of the newspapers, a great deal of work remains to be done in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. I am happy to report that I encountered many dedicated FEMA employees, who are working diligently to meet the needs of the survivors. I would like to think that EEOC employees have provide some help to FEMA and perhaps lightened the load of these dedicated employees.

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Season's Greetings

Wishing you a yours a safe and
happy holiday season.



*From the Officers of the
National Council of
EEOC Locals No. 216*