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Volunteers toil, but Gulf still a mess

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Columnist



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President Bush and I nearly crossed paths in Mississippi last week.

He was there to reassure folks that his administration hasn't forgotten about the ailing Gulf Coast, even if it wasn't mentioned in his January State of the Union address.

I was there as a participant in one of the many work teams that churches and service organizations have going in hurricane-ravaged areas.

Had I bumped into the president, I could have bent his ear with any number of heartwarming stories about the work that volunteers, faith-based groups and nonprofits are doing in the Gulf.

The small community of Waveland, Miss., was teeming with recovery efforts. I stayed at a camp operated by the Methodists. The Mennonites were just up the road. On breaks from the job, we used rest-room facilities set up by the Presbyterians. The Catholic Church, Rotary Club and Salvation Army are all at work.

I met volunteers who were on their sixth, seven or eighth stints to the Gulf. Retirees are especially plentiful. For two days I worked on the same team as Velma, an 82-year-old worker from Wichita. She was admirably adept at the mudding and taping process required in Sheetrocking.

Velma's 79-year-old husband, Marvin, is a retired electrical engineer. He understands wiring, which automatically elevated him to rock-star status on the work crew.

These are good stories about the American spirit, and Lord knows the president could use some upbeat news. But the big story is much less pleasant.

A year and a half after Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf is still a mess. And the Mississippi River will reverse course before volunteers like Velma, Marvin and me get it up and running.

In Waveland and neighboring coastal towns, we saw houses stripped to their foundations, trash stacked up on roadsides, devastated woodlands and unclaimed boats. Waveland, about 60 miles east of New Orleans, took the eye of the hurricane and storm surge of more than 30 feet. The combination of wind and water destroyed every habitable structure in the town.

More than 18 months later, hundreds of families live in FEMA trailers, either in developments or on their own lots, next to gaping holes where their homes used to be. Most displaced renters have received no help. Homeowners are feuding with insurance companies. Tales abound of crooked contractors who've skipped town with the savings of hurricane victims, and of wage theft by employers using government contracts.

What little rebuilding that has occurred has mostly been achieved by wealthier residents with hefty savings accounts. Only now is money from federal grants finally trickling through a maze of red tape and into the hands of local governments and nonprofits.

To some extent, the trials of one small town are repeated in communities along the Gulf and in the ravaged neighborhoods of New Orleans.

It's no wonder Bush got an earful when he visited New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss., last week. People want help with affordable housing and access to medical services. And they want jobs.

A call is building among students, clergy, civil-rights leaders and others in the Gulf and around the country for an effort that's being called the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. It proposes a public-private partnership that would hire 100,000 Gulf residents at decent wages to build homes and facilities needed for vital services.

The concept's similarities to the Works Projects Administration, which put people back to work during the Great Depression, make it anathema to the stated philosophy of the Bush administration, which is to shrink the role of government while encouraging free-market forces and the volunteer sector.

But 18 months into a disaster of enormous magnitude, the limits on the market's effectiveness and volunteer capacity are painfully apparent.

Only the federal government is big enough to step in and get the job done. It would restore a lot of people's faith in their nation to see it take that step.

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