

## **FCC Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks**

### **Remarks by Cheryl Heppner Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Advocacy Network**

#### **Introduction**

I am Cheryl Heppner, and I represent the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Advocacy Network, a national coalition of 16 nonprofit organizations of, by, and for deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened and deaf-blind individuals<sup>1</sup>. We thank Ms. Victory and this panel for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

In my presentation, I'll be using the terms "hearing loss" and "deaf and hard of hearing persons" to cover all four of the groups I've mentioned.

#### **Overview of Hearing Loss**

There are 31 million Americans with some degree of hearing loss. The number is rising dramatically with the aging of the baby boomers, and is expected to reach 78 million by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

Hearing aids and cochlear implants can help, but:

- Studies show only 1 out of 4 people who need a hearing aid use one;
- The average person with hearing loss waits seven years to get help;<sup>3</sup>
- They do not restore an ear to 'normal';
- Most people have only one, impacting their ability to locate sound

#### **Emergencies and Hearing Loss**

People with hearing loss use many strategies and tools for communication. Katrina stressed those strategies and took away many tools. For example:

- Katrina brought humidity, heavy rain, flooding and high temperatures (causing perspiration). All of these are enemies of hearing aids and cochlear implants because moisture can invade their circuitry. As a result, many people became heavily dependent on visual information.
- Katrina caused widespread power outages and loss of telecommunications, which made it difficult or impossible to reach the professionals who provide

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<sup>1</sup> DHHCAN member organizations are: American Association of the Deaf-Blind, American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, Association of Late-Deafened Adults, American Society for Deaf Children, Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, Communication Service for the Deaf, Deaf Seniors of America, Gallaudet University, Gallaudet University Alumni Association, National Association of the Deaf, National Black Deaf Advocates, National Catholic Office of the Deaf, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, USA Deaf Sports Federation, The Caption Center/WGBH.

<sup>2</sup>Newsweek, "A Little Bit Louder, Please", by David Noonan, June 6, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Hearing Loss Association of America

visual information through interpreting, transliteration, and translation of spoken words to text.

- Katrina cut off people who were deaf-blind from their support service providers, who facilitate communication, provide visual and auditory information, and act as sighted guides.

### **Communication, Hearing Loss and Katrina**

At its first meeting, the panel heard from numerous presenters whose companies, agencies and organizations planned carefully for Katrina. Their work in retaining and restoring communication was heroic, and we thank them. We also thank the FCC for its dedicated work to support them, and its unprecedented effort to assist the disability community in the aftermath of Katrina. Despite these efforts, people with hearing loss encountered many difficulties. To name just a few:

#### **Television**

When alerted to a potential emergency, people with hearing loss tend to turn to their televisions to get more information. Many television stations did not provide visual information, or provided insufficient information, to convey the gravity of the situation and what actions should be taken.

FCC regulations requiring this information have been in effect for years, and the FCC has sent broadcasters several reminders of their obligations. On September 9, 2005, prompted by Katrina-related complaints from consumers, the FCC issued yet another reminder.

Deaf and hard of hearing consumers were frustrated that they could get news about Katrina on national news program broadcasts that were captioned, but could not find out what was happening in their own towns through local newscasts. Here in Mississippi, they weren't given important information such as the need to boil or treat water. And in Lafayette, LA there were times when the only visual information a local TV station provided was scrolling captions with phone numbers to call and a list of closed roads.

Details that were given to others who could hear were important:

- What resources will someone get by calling the phone numbers, and what are the hours the numbers are staffed?
- What exact sections of the roads are affected?
- What are alternate routes?
- What is the anticipated length of the closures?

#### **Radios**

With power and telecommunications outages, at times the one source of information available was through battery-powered radios. Yet these radios are often useless to people who have more than mild to moderate hearing loss.

#### **Telecommunications**

Portable/temporary cell towers became crucial to resurrection of the telecommunications network, but power sources remained problematic. Many specialized devices used by deaf and hard of hearing individuals, such as text telephones and powerful amplified phones, don't work with off-the-shelf batteries.

Telecommunications relay services allow people with hearing loss to make calls to, and receive calls from, standard telephone users by receiving the audio portion through text or sign language. In Louisiana and Mississippi, even when phone service was available, the phone numbers for relay users would not work for several days. This was a major concern for people who wanted to contact their friends and family to reassure them of their safety and inform them of their whereabouts.

In addition, a number of relay service providers struggled to get permission to install free equipment in shelters so that people who were deaf and hard of hearing would have the same ability to make calls as others.

Where cell towers existed, there was a need for wireless text devices or computers to access relay services.

Barbara White and Alexis Greeves were deployed by Gallaudet University in Washington, DC to Houston on September 18, 2005. Three days later, Barbara found herself driving Alexis and 11 other evacuees from New Orleans to Austin, trying to escape from Hurricane Rita.

All of these individuals are deaf. Unable to make use of the car radio, they did not have any access to radio announcements with information about driving routes. They did not get updates that would help them know how far they were from the path of the hurricane, or other details that would help Barbara assess the safety of the group.

The one tool Barbara had was her pager. It brought her emergency alerts for the Houston area, which gave the frightening news that Rita was a Category 5 storm.

The drive, which normally takes two hours, took 15. Pager reception was nonexistent in some of the towns they passed. But Barbara was able to use her pager to contact her husband back in Maryland. He, in turn, went to the Internet. He visited the Mapquest website, found route information, and sent it to her.

### **Lessons from Katrina**

Our coalition continues to work on a detailed Katrina report, which will include recommendations that build upon a national report about experiences during 9/11 and its aftermath, released in December 2004.

The report gave the nation's emergency communication system a failing grade and listed building an effective communication system as one of its two top priorities.<sup>4</sup> Among the related recommendations that were reinforced by Katrina experiences are:

- The critical need for additional redundancy to ensure effective communication during preparation, notification, response, and recovery.
- The need to develop a visually accessible communication system that can operate with off-the-shelf batteries (i.e., a text radio).
- The need to better equip shelters and train providers to ensure effective communication with deaf and hard of hearing evacuees.

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<sup>4</sup> Emergency Preparedness and Emergency Communication Access: Lessons Learned Since 9/11 and Recommendations, available at <http://www.nvrc.org/content.aspx?page=2451&section=5>

Katrina also was a powerful lesson about the second priority. It calls for the building of a national network that will actively involve and integrate individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing in such things as:

- Emergency planning at all levels
- Equipment testing
- Disaster exercises
- Training of public safety and security personnel
- Volunteer work with such organizations as the Red Cross and Citizen Corps

The massive scale of relief efforts for Katrina has highlighted the importance of community-based organizations. Deaf and hard of hearing persons impacted by Katrina in particular owe a tremendous debt to churches with deaf ministries, schools for the deaf, and agencies and organizations dedicated to serving deaf and hard of hearing people. Many continue to be crucial to recovery efforts.

Additional information is available in the report “Emergency Preparedness and Emergency Communication Access: Lessons Learned Since 9/11 and Recommendations”, available at:

<http://www.nvrc.org/content.aspx?page=2451&section=5>

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