

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

September 23, 2005

## Helping Hands

How can we help? That's the question that comes to each one of us when we see the suffering of Gulf coast residents and the incomprehensible devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Newspaper and television reporters say cash donations will do the most good, but individuals want to do more. Here are some of the offers people have made to me.

One elderly woman contacted me early in the morning a few days after the onslaught of Katrina, saying she could not sleep because of the televised images of families displaced by the storm. She called to offer two unused bedrooms to hurricane refugees. Shortly after that call, a man called with the same offer for a couple of rooms in his Monson home.

After the full scale of destruction began to sink in, other calls kept coming in. Just a few days ago, a resident offered the use of her unoccupied Longmeadow home, hoping that a teacher from the disaster area would be able to come to Western Massachusetts.

Others have wondered about volunteering to join the on-site relief workers, though they lack the Red Cross or FEMA training. The helpless feeling that comes from their inability to follow their desires might lead to over-enrollment in any upcoming training courses.

Gov. Romney's offer to house refugees at Camp Edwards on Cape Cod opened the door for local volunteers, and the state was overwhelmed with thousands of offers to help. When only 200 refugees arrived, most offers of assistance were put on hold. Our Longmeadow Fire Department chaplain, Father Larry Provenzano, was called on to help plan for their arrival, using the experience he gained in New York in the days after 9/11.

My own participation has been limited to the monetary level, with cash donations and one extra effort. My family has filled a coin bank with spare change over the past 15 years, and we decided to turn the money into Coins for Katrina, hoping that the offer would prompt others to join the crusade. A Springfield office worker called after reading about my offer in the newspaper to say she had gone through her desk and removed several fistfuls of coins to add to my donation, and a neighborhood youngster offered the contents of his piggy bank.

Because I thought it would be hard to find a recipient for 90 pounds of pennies, I was excited to learn that Springfield's Salvation Army could feed them into its coin counter. So I picked up the other donations, loaded everything into the car and delivered them to 170 Pearl Street. The coins tallied \$201, a sum that I matched with a separate donation.

Major Tom Perks, co-director of the Springfield office assured me that all donations targeted to hurricane relief go directly to that purpose. Overhead expenses are budgeted separately, ensuring that 100% of donations go to relief efforts. Incidentally, Major Perks expects to be deployed to the disaster area with just a few hours' notice.

The scope of the recovery effort has yet to be realized or designed. Yet, so long as we continue to come forward with offers of individual assistance, we will be taking small steps toward the rebuilding of the lives of those who are living with such unprecedented and unimaginable loss.