

After Action Report
North Alabama Tornadoes
DR 463-10

On April 24, 2010 a series of tornadoes swept across Marshall, DeKalb and Morgan Co, AL, causing widespread destruction of property. Almost miraculously, there was no loss of life. The epicenter of the damage was along a path through Albertville. Extensive damage occurred in Westgate Trailer Park on Horton Road, home to a large number of Hispanics, many without English skills. President Obama declared this a disaster on May 3, 2010.



The Diocese of Birmingham organized a relief effort headed by Angel Steadman, Assistant Director of Catholic Social Services. This effort worked through the local parish, St William Catholic Church in Guntersville in conjunction with their St. Vincent de Paul Conference and numerous parish volunteers. This effort was funded by the Diocese through Catholic Charities, as well as corporate and private donations. Their focus was on immediate relief, providing temporary shelter, food, clothing, building materials, and some repairs. This phase consisted of serving 99 families, comprising 444 people. A total of 1,500 meals were served, including 840 delivered to homes. Financial

assistance including in-kind help amounted to \$32,052.33. This was a great start but not sufficient to handle all of the relief needed.

The Birmingham Diocese, Huntsville District Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul applied to the National Headquarters for disaster relief funds in the amount of \$50,000. This total was approved, with an initial installment of \$30,000 received on May 19th. A second installment of \$10,000 arrived on October 8th.

In the meantime, on May 6th, the Council Disaster Relief Coordinator contacted FEMA Headquarters and the on-site Red Cross Disaster Coordinator, as well as the local chapters in Marshall and DeKalb Counties to establish contact and offer the assistance of the Huntsville-Birmingham Area St. Vincent de Paul Council, namely as participants in their Unmet Needs Committee(s), if formed. The reception to these offers was lukewarm, since both chapters and FEMA were overwhelmed at the time with immediate relief efforts. However, we were informed that the Mayor of Albertville was forming a Long Term Recovery Committee (LTRC), and we were invited to participate. The Council President and Disaster Coordinator attended our first meeting, where we explained our capability, our experience in other disasters, and our availability of funds for assistance within our rules and guidelines. We encountered fellow committee members with whom we had previously worked, e.g. VOAD, Red Cross, Lutheran Ministries. It was obvious from the outset that the leadership of this committee did not want to heed the advice of the more experienced members. For example, the role of project manager was given to a local church member who lacked experience in this role, despite the fact that the Red Cross offered to serve this function. It also became evident that that primary thrust, as guided by the city administration, was to focus on debris removal and other public works efforts. This despite the fact that hundreds of homes were damaged and businesses closed due to storm damage. After attending several of the LTRC meetings, we came to the conclusion that this LTRC was not a traditional Unmet Needs Committee. Hence we made a decision to do our own case management, working in coordination with the Red Cross, St. William Parish, and the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator. We mutually felt that we could respond more quickly, cut the red tape and hence assist more families in a shorter time. We were later vindicated in this decision.

The Council Disaster Relief Coordinator met with the ARC Madison-Marshall Counties Disaster Relief Coordinator and mutually agreed to cooperate in this effort. She made available the initial damage surveys that the ARC had performed immediately after the tornado. This permitted the team to focus on those cases that the ARC had already assessed as being in need, as well as those we identified by an area reconnaissance. There were many roofs draped in blue tarps, a tell-tale sign that repairs were needed. There was a sense of urgency because the City of Albertville threatened to condemn structures that were not repaired within 30 days.

We called an organizing meeting, attended by the incoming and outgoing pastors of St. William Church, the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator, the Church financial secretary and members of the St. Vincent de Paul Disaster Relief Team. We agreed to the following procedures: We would employ the St. William Disaster Relief Fund as our financial agent. Angel Steadman would provide case management within her time limitations, with the SVdP team picking up the slack. The team had a bilingual member who was invaluable, since over 75 percent of our clients were Hispanic. This arrangement, although non-traditional, worked beautifully. St. Vincent de Paul is eternally grateful for the cooperation of Father Tim Pfander and Ms Laura Hodge in supporting our ministry.

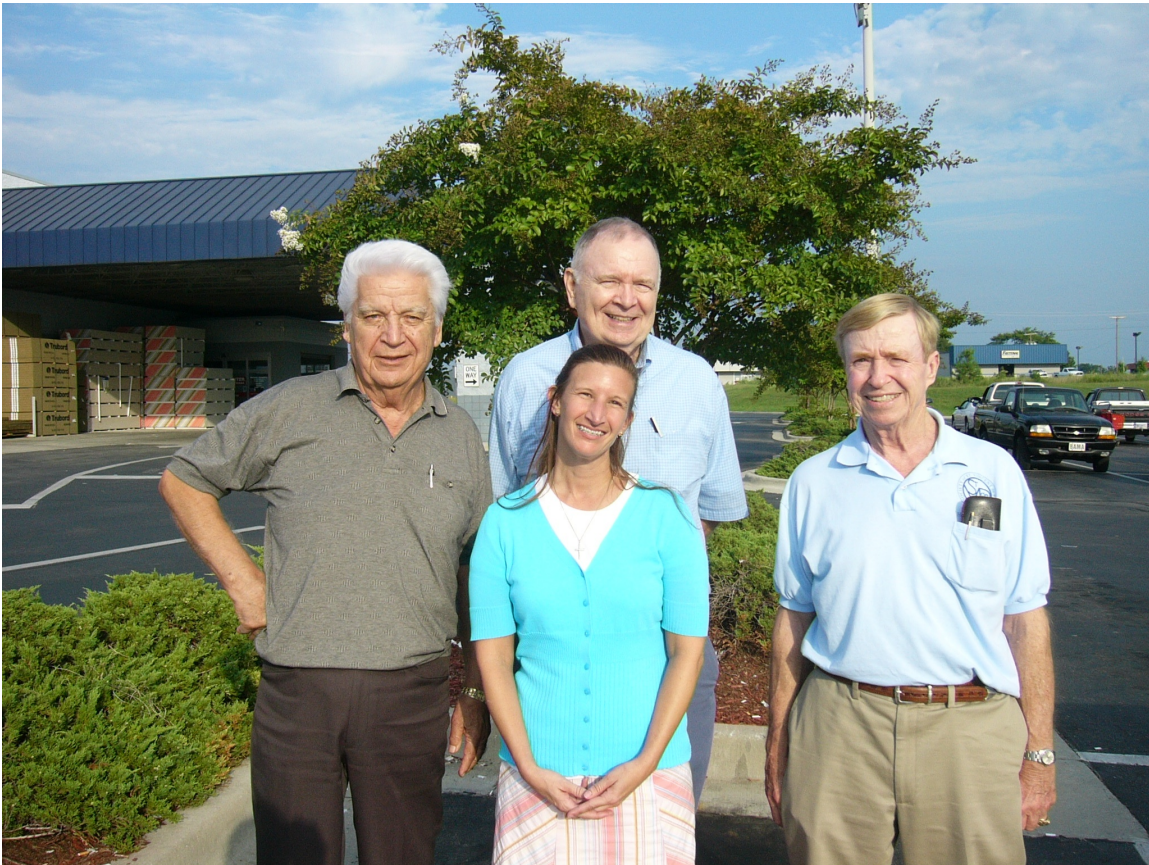


We established a schedule whereby we met each Wednesday at St. William Church offices to plan the day. Then we would visit the various clients in the usual manner, two-by-two and get an update on their needs. Some families required repair work. We contracted with several local builders who did the job, billed St. William, who paid the contractors, and SVdP in turn reimbursed the St. William Disaster Relief Fund. We basically agreed that the Diocese would pay for the labor and SVdP would pay for materials, rent, and utilities. We encountered clients who were in financial difficulty because they were unable to work, or had to relocate from uninhabitable residences. This explains the significant number of rent and utilities cases.

In coordination with the Red Cross, we provided assistance to everyone who needed our help, being careful to avoid duplication with the LTRC, who toward the end of November were finally helping individual families.

Our task was made more difficult by the fact we had initially only four members on the team, later to be joined by a member from Muscle Shoals. This entailed a 100 mile round trip drive to perform cases, as well as the better part of a day per week. We gladly made that commitment.

In summary, we provided monetary assistance totaling \$34,333.47. We assisted 47 families, comprising 156 persons. Our members drove 1,457 miles and devoted 1,811 hours to this effort. A breakout of cases is enclosed, minus names of clients to protect confidentiality.



The Disaster Team: Rudy Barraza, Angel Steadman, Bob Eison, Woodie DeLeuil. Not shown: John Lehrter