

Mental Health Problems From Katrina Persist

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ATLANTA, Nov. 8 -- Hurricane Katrina left more than gutted houses and empty streets along the Gulf Coast.

The most devastating impact of the storm, which killed thousands of people and destroyed entire towns, can be seen in the desperate faces of people more than a year later, survivors and rescue workers said in a panel discussion Wednesday.

The panel was part of an annual Carter Center symposium on mental health policy. This year's focus is on the psychological effects of Hurricane Katrina.

Panelists said mentally ill patients are still unable to get treatment and medicine because so few services are available in New Orleans and other damaged cities. But the storm also triggered mental problems -- most commonly depression and anxiety -- in people who had never before had them.

"When you see your neighbor's body floating by, it's pretty traumatizing," said Jeff Wellborn, assistant commander for crisis transportation services at the New Orleans Police Department.

Wellborn's unit handles all calls to police involving mentally ill people. With just two of the city's 11 hospitals operating, officers can take only the most serious cases in for medical attention, he said.

Law enforcement agencies in New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson Parish say they are answering more calls than before the storm about domestic abuse, drunkenness and fights. Involuntary commitments to mental hospitals are up from last year, and the number of suicides in Orleans Parish has tripled.

James Cooper, who works for the Extra Mile, which recruits volunteers for the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, said he is frustrated that the federal government has done little to help pay for mental health services for hurricane survivors. And mental health professionals have nowhere to turn for help with their own anxiety from the storm, he said.

"It's so hard for them to deal with what they had to go through, and then to deal with clients all day long," Cooper said.

Wellborn said many police officers in New Orleans have not sought help for the trauma they suffered from rescuing stranded residents and policing essentially lawless streets.

Officers are having trouble controlling their tempers and are getting into altercations with people on routine calls.

The symposium, which has been held annually for 21 years, brings mental health professionals from around the country together to discuss how to help people with psychological distress.

"Hurricane Katrina is teaching us much about the long-term psychological impact of disasters," Rosalynn Carter, wife of former president Jimmy Carter, said in an e-mailed statement. "We brought people together at the Carter Center to ensure that mental health needs are a priority in responding to future disasters."