

Rebuilding Industry Grapples with Katrina Fallout

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Even the smallest pockets of the U.S. economy, such as automotive electrical rebuilding, have felt the punch of Hurricane Katrina, which dusted across Florida and later decimated the Gulf Coast at the end of August. Officially the most destructive storm ever to strike the U.S., Katrina's sustained winds of 145 mph and enormous swath of fury continued to destroy lives and property long after it moved ashore.

Brad Raye, general manager of Hammett's Auto Electric in Biloxi, Miss., fled to Alabama when the evacuation order came. Hammett's is located three blocks from the beach, north of the giant Hard Rock Café guitar which consistently made the evening news film loop in the wake of the storm.

Raye returned to Biloxi a week later to a shop that had been filled with three feet of water and had its bay doors blown off. He also found their faithful shop dog, Ginger, near death and had to have her put to sleep. Hammett's location in Gulfport, Miss. went under five feet of water.

"We lost lots of small parts," said Raye, "The bottom three shelves were under water and we lost a lot of Transpo regulators and rectifiers. The stuff is piled up now waiting to see what the insurance will do."

Besides structural damage and loss of small parts, Raye said they also suffered the loss of equipment such as shakers and lathes when the motors were submerged. Like many other coastal businesses, Raye is hoping to make a claim of wind damage because of the wind-driven tidal surge. Hammett's didn't have flood insurance.

By mid-September, Raye said his area was getting cleaned up "really quick." They still had no phone or mail service, but power and water had been restored.

His house received minor damage, but one of their employees "lost everything" and that helps keep things in per-

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spective. Even sleeping on the porch for a week in the sweltering heat didn't discourage him.

"I had to stop and realize how lucky I was to have a house to come home to," he said. "I'm learning a lot about chainsaws."

The closer you get to the beach, the greater the devastation. Many historical homes are completely destroyed, and even Confederate President Jefferson Davis's home "took a whoppin'."

"Biloxi's just never going to be the same. But people are coming together and helping each other. Banks are giving you 90 days for mortgage payments and you don't have to worry about bills. There's so much food, ice, water, and things like diapers down here."

Raye said one bright spot for Hammett's is an increase in fleet service and other industrial work for crews involved in the repair and reconstruction of the community.

"This is good because we need to get some business to keep busy and keep rolling," he said. "I haven't had a paycheck in two weeks."

New Orleans Rebuilder Waits in Texas

New Orleans native Wayne Estrade, owner of Diamond Starter & Alternator Shop, just isn't sure how many more blows he can take and still come out fighting. In 2002, his shop burned down in the middle of the night, he suffers with numerous health conditions, and he was just beginning to get his business back up—three blocks from the Convention Center in downtown New Orleans. He had no replacement insurance.

We reached him via cell phone at a hotel in San Antonio, Texas, where he hoped to receive word he could return home "any day." Half of his relatives have homes under water, but he's heard his home, located about 10 miles from his shop, sustained only roof damage.

"But what you can see from the air and what you see when you open the door is a world of difference," said Estrade.

Estrade said that even after things begin to return to normal, New Orleans rebuilders will face more hardships. One problem he anticipates is the influx of new cars which will replace all the late-model vehicles that went under water. His biggest fear is the rumor he's heard that WAI will not rebuild its warehouse, which will leave local rebuilders without a quick source of supply.

"New Orleans will be just like any small town if WAI doesn't come back. We can't wait to get parts shipped," he said. "I don't even know if New Orleans is going to have rebuilders anymore."

WAI spokesman Tom Lubrano said that they are "weighing all the options" about whether or not to reopen in New Orleans and are still undecided. The warehouse lost one third of its roof and is still not secure, although they have not experienced any looting. All five employees are safe, although they are "still spread out" with other evacuees.

WAI is currently servicing gulf region customers from the Memphis, Dallas and Atlanta warehouses. They are shipping a lot of heavy-duty parts for emergency response vehicles from Memphis and also servicing a few rebuilders.

Relief and Support at All Levels

Lubrano said WAI was quick to step up to support its employees who suffered loss. Donations were taken from coworkers and then matched by the corporation with a total of \$17,000 which will be divided among the five New Orleans warehouse employees.

WRS Division Western Regional Manager Bob Hawes said they even had a few customers that donated to their relief effort.

"Additionally, any request for assistance from a WAI customer will be reviewed and responded to on a case by case basis. They know best what WAI can do to help then and, if appropriate, WAI will do it," said Hawes.

REGITAR-USA, which is located 140 miles north of Mobile, Ala., has also been active in the relief effort. Owners Y.T. and Chau Lee Tsai donated

and delivered over 100 rechargeable flashlights to help hurricane survivors.

Dan Poremba, new products manager at REGITAR, said since they were aware that the flashlights were going to an area still without power, they “opened every package and charged every battery” before they were sent.

“We have also notified the local industrial association that we will provide temporary, part time jobs to relocated victims of the disaster should the occasion arise, with possible full time employment in mind,” said Poremba.

REGITAR-USA employees have also been generous with donations at local drop-off locations.

Even automotive associations have been working to provide relief for their members. Only days after the storm, SEMA launched a web-based industry response center to assist member companies. Their Web site, www.sema.org/disasterrelief, provides real-time information on housing and jobs, federal and state aid, volunteer opportunities, and industry relief activities. SEMA is also matching monetary donations to the American Red Cross, up to a total of \$50,000.

Automotive Parts Remanufacturers Association (APRA) President Bill Gager said they have been in touch with members they can reach to help assess their needs.

“We are encouraging people to give to those charities that are so heavily involved in the area such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and various church groups. We do not have a relief program because we felt that would be too confusing since there is so much going on out there from those organizations on the ground that can help with specific needs,” Gager said.

Other efforts from those in the rebuilding industry to provide comfort and relief have simply swelled from the personal level.

Shortly after the storm, Mohammad Samii, owner of Sammy’s Auto Electric in Champaign, Ill., made a post on RebuilderNet with stories of a couple Gulf Coast friends he had been able to contact. He then made a plea: “I would like to ask the RebuilderNet members to give a call of sympathy and offer help if

you can. And please if you know other rebuilders in the damaged area, post their names and numbers on this forum. Maybe we can help some of our colleagues in these hard times.”

Exchange editor Polly Shea was even able to donate and deliver furniture and other goods to a displaced family through her church.

“It just felt so good to be able to do something. I had been praying for and weeping for these people for weeks and finally got to put my arms around some of them,” she said.

Full House

Claudia Chamorro, who works in customer service and accounts receivable at the WRS in Orlando, Fla., has a full house. Her immediate family—mother, two brothers and sister—were evacuated from New Orleans and are now living in her two-bedroom apartment.

“It’s great having my family with me at this time because I normally only got to see them about three to four times a year,” said Chamorro. “It’s been a little challenging due to the fact that my apartment only has two bedrooms, but considering that they have a roof over their heads and are in good health, they could be a whole lot worse off.”

Chamorro’s mother owns an upholstery shop in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie. They have been able to return briefly and assess the condition of their home and business, which were both heavily damaged but repairable.

“It’s a shame that there are thousands of families that were not able to evacuate, whether by choice of their own or due to their limited financial resources, bad health or lack of transportation,” said Chamorro. “My family was very fortunate to leave in time before they got stuck in the city. I only wish that everyone would’ve had that same opportunity.”