

Baton Rouge Advocate – McGlinchey on Hurricane Katrina

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This story by Ned Randolph first appeared in the Baton Rouge Advocate

Evacuees from Hurricane Katrina awoke Tuesday morning to the grim reality that it could be weeks or months before they can return to their homes, businesses and normal lives.

“They were fully expecting to come back in two days, but it turned out much worse,” said **Rudy Aguilar**, managing partner of McGlinchey Stafford law firm.

So, like other businesses from New Orleans, the firm has made the decision to relocate about 88 displaced lawyers and 173 support staff members to offices in Baton Rouge and elsewhere for “an extended period of time,” Aguilar said. “I figure about 50 lawyers will stay in the Baton Rouge office with us,” he said.

The firm has reserved space near its Baton Rouge offices in One American Place downtown.

“Some are here now, some are arriving from wherever — Memphis, Jackson, Oklahoma. As far as we know, all of our people are safe.”

They have had to turn to temporary housing and even commercial space to keep their companies running.

“We’ve got partners with small kids, trying to get them into schools,” Aguilar said. “Mind you, it’s already the middle of August and schools are full.”

Though the world stopped in New Orleans, businesses such as McGlinchey Stafford have clients elsewhere who expect their needs to be handled, Aguilar said.

“I think you’re going to have a lot of New Orleanians coming here and trying to re-establish themselves until they can return home,” he said.

“So Baton Rouge, be ready to be helpful.” Scott Thompson, chief executive officer of Baton Rouge-based Network Technology Group, said companies have already filled up cubicles in his Disaster Recovery Center at Bon Carré on Florida Boulevard, which provides temporary space, telephone and Internet connections.

“We’ve got more than we can handle,” Thompson said. With 93 available cubicles taken, Thompson is reserving 23,000 to 29,000 square feet of additional space inside the former Florida Boulevard mall where he’s located.

“We’re making provisions to have portable trailers and other space here at Bon Carré,” Thompson said. “For most businesses in New Orleans, it is over for at least three to six months.” The Times-Picayune, which ended up abandoning its New Orleans newsroom as floodwaters filled the city Tuesday, has also set up shop at the center.

“I’ve been trying to tell businesses in New Orleans for three years that this kind of thing would happen, and they’ve been telling me to leave. And now it’s happened,” he said. Thompson said he jumped in a rental car in Nashville, Tenn., and drove to Baton Rouge when he heard Katrina was headed toward southeastern Louisiana. He arrived at 2 a.m. Monday. “I can’t take care of everybody, but for whoever calls, I can probably get them to other parts of the city,” he said. Phones have been ringing off the hook at The Relocation Center, a private Baton Rouge company that helps corporate clients find housing for employees.

“They’re looking for temporary living quarters ... anywhere really from Gramercy to Baton Rouge to Zachary,” Greg Bonaventure, director of relocations, said.

On Tuesday alone, the company fielded more than 100 calls from individuals and company managers.

“We’re looking to get as much housing as we can for people,” he said. “Unfortunately, it now has to be allotted. We can’t fulfill all their needs.”

In fact, according to real-estate appraiser and consultant Wesley Moore, Baton Rouge has only about 4,000 or so available rental units.

“And there’s how many displaced households in New Orleans?” he said.

“Then you throw in the hotel rooms, which, of course, doesn’t even make a dent,” he said. “There are going to be a lot of people staying in remote points — Shreveport, Lake Charles, wherever they can find housing.”

Moore said the Federal Emergency Management Agency will likely set up tent villages.

“I think you’ll see something of a temporary housing crisis,” he said.

“I don’t think the masses had any idea of just what kind of fallout could result from a storm like this.”

Less-connected individuals are deluging C.J. Brown real-estate offices by phone and in person, desperate for housing, office manager Sandy Daly said.

“Housing is nonexistent at this point almost,” said Daly, who after many phone calls finally placed one family in a “model unit” home for a newly renovated subdivision.

Her assistant fielded a call from a doctor who offered to pay cash to buy a house.

“She has 16 people scattered over Arkansas, and she’s desperate to find anything to shelter these people,” Lorrinda Dickinson said.

“She was asking about the housing market in Baton Rouge, whether there were houses for sale. She said, ‘I have cash, how long will it take to close?’ She was in her car, I don’t know where she was,” Dickinson said.

Meanwhile, the company’s property management division in Baton Rouge, which normally handles those customers, has no phone service. Many of the real-estate company’s 220 agents are without power at their own homes.

“We sent an e-mail out and voice mails to all agents throughout C.J. Brown asking if anyone had available rental properties of their own, or sellers who might be available to rent their homes on a temporary basis,” Daly said.

“The stories are heart-wrenching. You can hear in their voices how desperate they are,” Dickinson said. “All we can do is take names and numbers. There’s nothing you can do for them.”

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