

Displaced companies find ways to keep going

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This story by Timothy Boone first appeared in The Baton Rouge Advocate.

When Hurricane Katrina started to head toward their city two weeks ago, officials with the New Orleans law firm of **McGlinchey Stafford** jumped into action.

They contacted the building manager for One American Place, where the Baton Rouge office operates from, to lease more space. They lined up 70 apartments and homes around Baton Rouge for the attorneys and staffers who would be displaced by the storm. Technicians started routing all electronics and communications through a server in Houston. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the company had set up everything to move its headquarters to Baton Rouge.

"When everybody left the office on Saturday, it was just like a normal day," said **Rudy Aguilar**, a managing partner for McGlinchey Stafford. "The only difference is that people packed for two days and we moved 100 miles away."

Right after Labor Day, the more than 80 attorneys and staffers who had been shifted to Baton Rouge all had desks, computers, cell phones and PDAs. "We're a national practice with a lot of work going on and the majority of work is still happening," he said.

The company's hurricane evacuation plan was the guideline for McGlinchey Stafford's actions, Aguilar said.

"We're a 30-year-old law firm and we've always had a disaster recovery plan," he said. "When we had Hurricane Ivan a year ago, we ran the exact same plan, except for securing office space."

The planning enabled McGlinchey Stafford to resume normal operations as soon as the expanded Baton Rouge office opened and put the company ahead of other firms that were looking for temporary housing for displaced employees.

"The housing market got very tight toward the end," Aguilar said.

The shortage of houses and apartments has caused Hancock Bank to provide daily bus service between metro Baton Rouge and its headquarters in Gulfport, Miss. Every day, two busloads of employees commute from the Mississippi Gulf Coast to Hancock's offices in Baton Rouge and Denham Springs, said George Schloegel, the bank's chief executive officer.

About 100 bank employees have been relocated to Hancock's offices in Denham Springs and Baton Rouge. Schloegel said the moves are part of the bank's disaster plan, which also called for setting up operations offices in Chicago, Hattiesburg, Miss.; and Tallahassee, Fla.

Schloegel said Hancock crews were deployed to the four areas a day or so before the storm came ashore, in order to set up emergency offices on the bank's northern, western and eastern boundaries and establish contact with the Chicago company that provides disaster recovery services. At the same time, each office held regular conference calls with Hancock officials to track the progress of the storm and make sure customers were taken care of before Katrina arrived.

"We were in anticipation mode, but we didn't anticipate the storm hitting an area this wide," he said.

Hancock's disaster recovery officer and his crew of several hundred employees put generators in place and boarded up branches. "We wanted to be able to open as quick as possible after the storm hit," Schloegel said.

Although Hancock's main headquarters in downtown Gulfport was heavily damaged by the storm, the first branches were able to open the day after Katrina hit. In some cases, employees were coming in to work after the storm destroyed everything they owned, Schloegel said.

"We're dispensing cash, we're helping companies make payroll, we're trying to get the economy rejuvenated so people can go back to work and become productive citizens," he said.

Schloegel said Hancock routinely updates its disaster plan after each evacuation and hurricane and the next version will include changes from Katrina. "We learned a lot this time," he said.

One of the changes may be to set up a permanent operations center in Baton Rouge or Denham Springs, to complement the activities in Gulfport, Schloegel said.

"Baton Rouge is a very convenient spot for us," he said.

Baton Rouge was also a convenient spot for Consolidated Graphics, which has combined its New Orleans printing operations into an existing office.

"We had 34 people in the office and 13 of them have come over here," said Doug McElwain, president of Consolidated Graphics. "We're just trying not to get in each other's way."

McElwain, who is a senior vice president with Champion Industries Inc., the West Virginia-based parent of Consolidated, said the commercial printer backs up its files daily. This allowed the company to pull information from its server.

"All of our files are operational and functional," he said. "We won't miss a peg giving customers what they want."

Consolidated employees have also opened up their doors to the New Orleans workers. "I've got the delivery man staying with me," McElwain said. "I've had as many as eight people staying in the house with me."

McElwain and Schloegel said they don't know how long their companies will maintain an increased presence in Baton Rouge.

Aguilar said it may be between six months and a year before attorneys return to the firm's Magazine Street office.

"Our office is high and dry and if we had power, water and infrastructure, we could get into there today," he said. "But there's going to have to be a lot of building in New Orleans before we can move back."

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Rudy Aguilar