

# Turkey Creek feels abandoned

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CNN

Thursday, September 22, 2005; Posted: 11:15 p.m. EDT (03:15 GMT)



Residents pack a Red Cross temporary center near Turkey Creek.

[One man brings relief to Turkey Creek](#) (3:22)



**GULFPORT, Mississippi (CNN) -- Life in Turkey Creek has little to spare in the best of times and the days following Hurricane Katrina have not been the best of times for this historic enclave in Gulfport, Mississippi.**

Residents of this predominantly low-income neighborhood not only worry about getting much needed financial aid, but they fear the damage caused by Katrina might be the death knell for a community deeply rooted in African-American history.

"Before the storm we were already deemed one of Mississippi's 10 most endangered places," said long-time resident Derrick Evans, head of the Turkey Creek Community Initiative.

"I mean we have been down on the ground in so many instances ... we are not going to let this place be erased off the map."

Turkey Creek, nestled against the Gulfport-Biloxi airport, was founded by a group of freed slaves after the Civil War. Most residents, including Evans, are descendants of these freemen and many still reside in the homes built during the Reconstruction era.

## Days after Katrina

The immediate days after Katrina ripped apart Gulfport further exposed the rift between the poorer residents of the Turkey Creek and North Gulfport communities and local and state officials.

According to Evans and other residents, the only "official" help these communities saw in the first days and weeks after the storm was the occasional water and food drop by the National Guard.

"It was neighbors, it wasn't the country, it wasn't the city, it wasn't the Red Cross," said Evans. "It was men who knew how to swim and inflate an air mattress, how to plug a jon boat and went down the road and pulled people out of attics."

Evans, who also is an adjunct black studies professor at Boston College, was in Boston at the time Katrina hit.

Assuming his community might not see immediate help, he and several friends caravanned to Mississippi, stopping along the way and purchasing bleach to combat mold, gasoline, generators, chainsaws and other supplies.

"I became the Gulf's biggest purveyor of bleach," said Evans with a laugh.

In the weeks since Katrina, Evans has traveled back and forth from Turkey Creek to cities like Meridian, Hattiesburg and Birmingham, Alabama to keep his neighbors and relatives supplied with everything from tarps, to

extension cords, to washing powder and paper towels. His one-man band efforts have left him with over \$20,000 of credit card debt.

### **Federal response**

FEMA and Red Cross officials said they did do the best they could to try and serve the Turkey Creek and North Gulfport communities as quickly as possible after the storm hit. Both organizations opened up centers within three miles of the neighborhoods on or around September 17, but word was slow to trickle down to residents.

"Class and race play a big part in it and it's bad communication on the part of the bureaucracy also," said Rose Johnson, a North Gulfport activist.

"It's been like the African-American community of North Gulfport and Turkey Creek have been totally excluded. They have received very little assistance ... people are confused, they don't [know] where to go because they're getting mixed information," she said.

FEMA spokesman Gene Romano disagrees with the characterization that his agency was slow to bring relief to lower income neighborhoods in Mississippi and along the Gulf Coast.

"While they may not have seen a person like myself in a FEMA shirt, they may have seen other disaster workers and again in the very beginning the volunteer agencies were providing support and that is the way the system is designed," said Romano.

Child care and caseworkers are available at the FEMA center to help residents with questions about loans, housing vouchers and grant assistance.

The Red Cross set up at a local community center and distributed checks ranging from \$360 to more than \$1,500 to Katrina-impacted residents.

Evans said he is satisfied that more help is finally in proximity to his community, but thinking back to the days after the storm he said he believes neighbor-to-neighbor help can do more than organizations and government agencies that come from the outside.

"If I can get chainsaws and gasoline into the Turkey Creek community or over there to my friends further up the watershed, they will save their neighbors. They will get ice, water, food, dog food, diapers, whatever is needed to their neighbors because they live in this place that endures," he said.