

Speakers laud faith-based groups for efforts to rebuild Gulf Coast

NEW ORLEANS – Speakers at a New Orleans conference on disaster relief and preparedness May 29 and 30 lauded the efforts of faith-based organizations in leading Gulf Coast recovery efforts in the two and a half years since Hurricane Katrina.

“Katrina taught us to work together more effectively,” said Jay Hein, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which hosted the conference.

Mr. Hein said the office’s policies and programs have become “embedded in communities” since the office’s founding seven years ago, and said the three candidates running for the presidency have each indicated their support for the office.

One focus of the conference, which offered workshops on disaster preparedness, recovery efforts, rebuilding, education, hunger and community development, was “how to get more resources – both volunteers and funds – to faith-based organizations,” said Mr. Hein.

“We have seen a terrific response to (Hurricane Katrina),” Mr. Hein said in remarks May 29. “We learned a lot about poverty but also learned a lot about generosity. What we do matters.”

Retired Marine Maj. Gen. Douglas O’Dell, federal coordinator for Gulf Coast rebuilding, pointed out that more than 1.1 million volunteers have donated more than 14 million hours of service to rebuilding efforts in the last two and a half years.

Habitat for Humanity, he said, “has become the largest builder of new homes in the New Orleans area. Catholic Charities has been a huge success story in helping post-Katrina.”

But stats don’t matter as much as what happens on the ground, he said. “Our efforts

are on the glide path to success," Gen. O'Dell emphasized.

First lady Laura Bush told the 1,000 conference delegates that "you represent the very strength of our country, and that is our citizens' genuine interest in the well-being and success of their neighbors."

Going back to the beginnings of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001, Mrs. Bush said the president "recognized that the spirit of compassion that our citizens have is our very asset when it comes to meeting community needs."

"The federal government may have great resources but it cannot and it should not solve great social problems alone," she said. "Instead, government is more effective in addressing communities' needs when it trusts local leaders and it partners with local organizations like the ones you lead."

Mrs. Bush pointed to one of those efforts, the charter school effort that followed the devastation of public schools in the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina.

"Hurricane Katrina damaged or destroyed hundreds of schools in the Gulf region, leaving thousands of students displaced," she said. "But today the vast majority (of schools) ... are up and running."

About 40 percent of all students in the New Orleans area now attend charter schools, "which provide greater flexibility and accountability than traditional public schools," she said. "New Orleans has the highest percentage of charter schools of any other city in the United States."

"Faith-based schools have also joined the charter schools in meeting the educational needs of students in New Orleans," Mrs. Bush added. "Today, about 40 percent of students in the area are educated at Catholic schools. ... Thanks to so many for setting this example (that) those faith-based institutions can meet pressing community needs."

Mrs. Bush recounted a trip to New Orleans in January, when she visited Reconcile New Orleans, a Catholic Charities program. It "is helping youth gain skills to successfully enter the hospitality and restaurant industries," she said.

Mrs. Bush said “from youth development to substance abuse treatment, building houses to teaching basic reading skills, faith-based and community organizations are the foundation upon which a better and stronger Gulf Coast can be rebuilt.”

“While the government can help rebuild brick and mortar,” Mrs. Bush said, “the organizations represented in this room are best equipped to mend hearts and lives.”