

# Project H.O.P.E. solicited donations

(Thursday, 10/19/2006 © Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel)

Workers for a FEMA-funded counseling program in Florida have solicited donations for hurricane victims despite federal guidelines that prohibit fundraising, program records show.

One counselor went to a South Florida Target to ask that flyers "be placed in the store requesting Christmas donations" for Hurricane Katrina evacuees, says a December 2005 report by Project H.O.P.E. (Helping Our People in Emergencies).

In January, counselors in Broward County sent out "many letters ... requesting financial assistance for survivors" of Hurricane Wilma, says another report.

Federal guidelines say engaging in disaster relief fundraising activities for victims is an inappropriate use of crisis counseling grants, which are intended to provide psychological help for disaster victims.

After the South Florida Sun-Sentinel questioned the fundraising, Florida's Department of Children & Families, which runs Project H.O.P.E., began an investigation. "The Inspector General is looking into any aspects of the program's operation that are inconsistent" with federal guidelines, said DCF spokesman Al Zimmerman.

Members of Congress have criticized Project H.O.P.E. since the Sun-Sentinel reported Oct. 8 that the grants -- totaling \$46.8 million in Florida since 2004 -- have paid for puppet shows, Hurricane Bingo, yoga on the beach and salsa for seniors. On Monday, U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, asked the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security to investigate the crisis-counseling program nationwide.

The newspaper raised "serious concerns about whether federal funds are being wasted," wrote Collins, chairwoman of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

The House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Investigations is holding a hearing on FEMA later this year and, based on the concerns of Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo, plans to include the crisis counseling program, a committee spokesman said.

Fifteen Congressmen have signed a letter written by Feeney asking the Inspector General for a "full investigation into the effectiveness of Project H.O.P.E."

The Inspector General is considering the requests, a spokeswoman said.

State and federal officials have defended Project H.O.P.E. "You all are doing a fabulous job," wrote DCF's Walter Liebrich, program manager for Project H.O.P.E., in a Sept. 25 e-mail to employees. DCF held a statewide conference call that day to discuss the Sun-Sentinel's upcoming story.

"It is our understanding that the piece being written will try to question the validity of PH,"

Liebrich wrote. "We all know everyone is doing a wonderful job and completely in compliance with what is expected by the feds."

The grants are funded by FEMA under a federal law intended to provide counseling for people suffering mental health problems from a disaster. FEMA relies on its federal partner, the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], to evaluate the program.

SAMHSA issued a series of program guidance documents on how the grants can be used. Fundraising for disaster victims is listed as an "inappropriate activity" for counselors.

Yet Project H.O.P.E.'s own records describe how counselors solicit corporate sponsorships, participate in fundraising telethons and arrange donations of food, furniture and toys for hurricane victims.

"Project H.O.P.E. continues to plan and coordinate a benefit concert" at a Lauderhill bar, says a June weekly report. "The proceeds from the concert will exclusively benefit Hurricane Wilma survivors in Broward County."

In February, Project H.O.P.E. helped the producers of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition find Katrina evacuees in South Florida to receive a \$5,000 shopping spree at Sears.

"The survivors who were interviewed were not told about the TV show, only that Project H.O.P.E. had been contracted [sic] by a major organization to seek information about needs for possible donations," a program report says. "The survivors that we work with are aware that Project H.O.P.E. often meets with organizations in efforts to obtain donation opportunities."

Counselors participated in telethons to raise money for storm victims in February and May and concentrated their efforts in April on "obtaining sponsorship" for a picnic for Katrina evacuees in Fort Lauderdale. "The Katrina team was able to obtain some great prize donations."

Asked to comment on the fundraising, SAMHSA released a statement saying that it was awaiting the results of the DCF investigation.

DCF's Zimmerman said that could take two months or longer.

"One of the questions we have is were these reports written accurately?" he said.

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