

Med School Assists Returning Evacuees

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rivet@tulane.edu

As thousands of New Orleans area residents poured back into the region following the evacuation for Hurricane Gustav, members of the Tulane University School of Medicine met them. Staff and faculty spread out across Orleans and Jefferson parishes to make sure those returning from the public-assisted evacuation would have access to medical care.



Dr. Francesco Simeone, left, and surgical resident Dr. Rafael Sierra, right, at the Union Passenger Terminal in New Orleans, wait for returning evacuees who might need medical care after Hurricane Gustav. (Photos from Dr. Karen DeSalvo)

Dr. Ben Sachs, senior vice president and dean of the Tulane School of Medicine, says this type of program reflects the values of his faculty and staff.

“I think our school has a major responsibility to ensure the health and well-being of the people of New Orleans when they return from evacuation,” Sachs says. “There is a need for our school to play a role and to coordinate our efforts with Louisiana State University and City Hall. It is absolutely essential.”

Doctors were on hand at the Union Passenger Terminal in Orleans Parish and at the Palace Theatre in Jefferson to perform basic health screenings, write prescription refills and ensure that any patients with special needs received continued care.

The Qatar Katrina Fund [mobile medical unit](#) also was deployed to bring care to the patients.

“For patients who needed to be sheltered because, for example, they might be oxygen-dependent but not have power at home, we staffed up a special-needs shelter and made certain they had a place to go,” says Dr. Karen DeSalvo, chief of general internal medicine and geriatrics at the medical school. “We wanted to make sure that none of the citizens of New Orleans that were coming back who were part of this special-needs population went without medical care.”

Those who volunteered say they felt the returning citizens were happy to see them and grateful for the opportunity to address any health concerns.



Leah Berger, director of operations for three Tulane community health clinics, checks up on a patient on board the Qatar Katrina mobile medical unit.

“They were very thankful,” says Dr. Francesco Simeone, associate professor of clinical medicine. “Just our being there with the white coat, telling them 'welcome

back' and smiling and being available, people were very happy to see us there.”

Simeone believes the fact that they could be on hand to address routine medical problems also helps to alleviate extra burden on area emergency rooms.

“I think physicians waiting at the terminal or staffing clinics have saved a lot of emergency room visits,” Simeone says. “In particular in that kind of emergency situation, with hospitals being potentially overloaded with other, sicker patients, it is very helpful.”

With Gustav being the first test since Hurricane Katrina, volunteers were happy to be able to be among the first-responders.

“The whole intention of why we received the grant for the mobile unit was to provide care to folks in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. It seemed apt that we do the same after Gustav,” says Leah Berger, director of operations for three Tulane community health clinics. “Immediately following any sort of emergency event, we want to make sure the people in the city are taken care of, whether it's citizens returning or the first responders that are here on the ground.”