



United Way Partner Agency

COMMUNITY CENTER OF ST BERNARD

1111 LeBeau Street
Arabi LA 70032
www.CCSTB.org

Phone: (504) 281-2512
Fax: (916) 675-7827

What's East of New Orleans?

Reflections on the First Anniversary of the Gulf Oil Spill

The past few years have been very difficult ones for families in southeast Louisiana, and especially in St Bernard Parish, which is located directly east of New Orleans' lower Ninth Ward. As I'm sure you remember, August 29, 2005 marked the landfall of hurricane Katrina and the devastating failure of the levee system that should have protected New Orleans and surrounding areas. The haunted faces of desperate people huddled on their rooftops as the floodwaters swirled around them remain some of the most poignant and tragic images in American history.

As a result of the levee failures, St Bernard Parish has the distinction of being the only county in America to have ever been completely flooded. And hurricane Katrina damage to the Murphy Oil Refinery caused a holding tank to rupture, releasing more than 1 million gallons of crude oil in the St Bernard town of Chalmette and resulting in the largest residential domestic oil spill in US history. But Katrina was not the end.

Hurricanes Rita, Ike and Gustav have followed since, wreaking havoc on a smaller but no less devastating scale for the struggling families caught in their path. Finally, in 2010, the Deepwater Horizon disaster spewed as much 205 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Fish and wildlife died; wetlands, beaches and bayous were coated with poisonous oily muck. And the livelihoods of thousands of people in St Bernard who depend on the fishing and seafood industries were jeopardized. Yet few outside the New Orleans region are aware that St Bernard Parish even exists, and even fewer know of the ongoing recovery struggle that continues every day here.

The crippling impact of this series of disasters on St Bernard Parish has been nothing short of catastrophic. Data released in December 2010 by the US Census Small Area Estimates Branch show that the median household income in St Bernard is only \$39,000, compared to \$50,000 for the US as a whole. Not surprisingly, the percentage of individuals living in poverty here is currently about 20% - significantly higher than the overall United States rate of 14%. Most disturbingly, 32% of St Bernard children now live in poverty, compared to 18% for the US as a whole.

The Community Center of St Bernard is a grassroots 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization. Our mission is to assist local residents and to help normalize life in these trying times. We are dedicated to providing a wide range of essential recovery resources, including free food, clothes, internet access, information and referrals, computer classes, and community outreach events such as bingo, holiday celebrations, and workshops.

And through our innovative Community Connections Model, the Center actively seeks to form collaborations with partner agencies to bring additional services to St Bernard Parish residents, including free medical care, legal aid, Medicaid enrollment, senior citizen employment training, financial literacy classes, crisis counseling, and food stamp assistance. More information about the various programs and services available through the Community Center is available at our webpage www.ccstb.org

While it is far too soon to measure the final impact of the 2005 – 2010 disasters on the lives of struggling families in St Bernard Parish, the first anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon disaster marks a critical milestone. This is a time for reflection on what has been done, and what remains to do, what has worked, and what has not. And unfortunately today there still remains so much that is unfinished in St Bernard.

The Parish's population in 2011 is only 51% of what it was in early 2005. There is no hospital anywhere in this Parish now, and no permanent offices for federal aid programs. Half of the oil spill damages claims filed by St Bernard residents have been denied, and all of the oil spill claims submitted by nonprofit relief agencies have been turned down as well.

Meanwhile, the collective failure of the media to spread awareness of the true conditions here remains a serious and ongoing problem. Though numerous celebrities and aspiring politicians (Oprah, Amy Goodman, Brad Pitt) come as close as New Orleans, they are rarely venture beyond the Lower Ninth Ward. Unfortunately this means that they remain in the dark about the lives and struggles of the people in St Bernard for whom the current situation is NOT a recovery but merely a later stage in an ongoing crisis.

Thank you for anything you can do to help us - it is much appreciated!

Sincerely yours,
R.M. "Iray" Nabatoff, Executive Director
Community Center of St Bernard
CCSTBP@yahoo.com
504-281-2512 Office
916-675-7827 Fax
www.ccstb.org