

LEX FRIEDEN: What exactly do you do here?

HOWARD CASTLEBERRY: Well, I'm the disaster relief director for our church. I was named to that nonpaying post right after Katrina hit. And so I've been here basically full time for the last two weeks, trying to help people navigate the system.

LEX: What qualifications did you have to be named by your church?

HOWARD: I was a warm body, willing to work and I have the unique situation of I don't have to work right now. And so I just wanted to donate my time. I've been through quite a few governmental processes myself and so, and having owned a business I can get things done.

LEX: Howard, have you learned anything in the two weeks since the storm?

HOWARD: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

LEX: The family you're working with that we're going to meet here, 29 members of the family I understand?

HOWARD: In total, 29 members, yes.

LEX: Who traveled together from the disaster area, managed to get all the way to Houston?

HOWARD: They- I don't think they ended up at the same spot, but I think they got here by various routes. But they tried to stay together, if they could.

LEX: So they were united after they got to Houston at the George R. Brown Convention Center?

HOWARD: Yes, that's right.

LEX: Shelter here. The challenge that you've had-- some of them have chronic health conditions?

HOWARD: That's right.

LEX: Some of them have acute conditions that have been exacerbated by the storm and their evacuation? What's been the greatest challenge, beyond the health care for these people?

HOWARD: Trying to keep the family unit intact. You've got an extended family that really has a much better chance of doing well in this world if they can stay together. And so the biggest challenge was to find housing quickly that was wheelchair accessible for a few of the apartments, close to bus routes, close to employment, and oh by the way, we need six units today. And I was able to find that.

LEX: My goodness! How long did it take to locate that housing?

HOWARD: It took me two furious days of driving from apartment to apartment and--

LEX: So that's the way you basically-- telephone, Internet, I mean you tried all of that?

HOWARD: My wife has been calling me from the house. We've set up a virtual phone bank at our house with two cell phones and our home phone, people calling to find what's available, what's not. And we just use various resources, lists of wheelchair accessible apartments. There is a list like that in the City of Houston. And then just calling one after another. This place has three units. This place has four. And how many do you have coming available in the next two weeks? And then from there, paring down the variables to just a few that met all the requirements. And then going to look at them and to see which ones were habitable and which ones weren't. And there were several that weren't.

LEX: When you found one that looked like it would work, how did you pay for it? I mean, apartments aren't free.

HOWARD: No. Well, my church has made a financial commitment to helping this group of seven families. And technically, I haven't paid for them yet. I actually have all the applications. What I did is I took applications from the apartment and grabbed seven copies of them, brought them back here, made copies of their drivers' licenses to go with the applications and then when I leave here, I'm going to get a money order for the deposits for all of the units so that they will hold them until their applications are accepted. And then they will sign leases. We have funds available at the church from donations to be the stop gap financing so to speak, until they can cash their FEMA checks. Because while they have all their FEMA checks, they haven't been able to get out of here to go cash them.

LEX: Who brought them FEMA checks? How did they get FEMA checks?

HOWARD: They went upstairs, I believe, to the post office that's been set up. This George R. Brown has been given a zip code. And so they got their FEMA checks that way.

LEX: They just mailed them to them?

HOWARD: Yeah.

LEX: How did they get registered to get them? Did they phone FEMA or was there a FEMA caseworker here?

HOWARD: There was a FEMA caseworker here and they registered upstairs on the third floor of this facility, which was, by the way, the best way to do it, I think.

LEX: To be there in person?

HOWARD: Absolutely.

LEX: So FEMA actually diagnosed, determined their needs while they were in line there, meeting with the caseworker?

HOWARD: Uh-huh, that's right, that's right.

LEX: They signed them up for housing, rental assistance and the check came through the post office the following day?

HOWARD: It did. There is a post office that's been set up on the third floor of this facility for primarily that purpose and for people to have their Social Security checks redirected to this location.

LEX: And the checks they got from FEMA, are they for housing only? Are they vouchers or are they--

HOWARD: No, this check's for emergency one month expenses, as I understand it.

LEX: Oh, okay.

HOWARD: And they can use that money the intent of that money is to get you through the first 30 days.

LEX: Okay.

HOWARD: And then after that, before that 30 days has expired, they must call a 1-800 number and recertify themselves. In the interim, they need to account for every penny that they've spent with that \$2,000 dollars.

LEX: So it's kind of a loan?

HOWARD: It's kind of a loan, so to speak, that they will, I guess, forgive once you've proven out the expenses. And then as your need continues, you are recertified on either a monthly or quarterly basis until you've been given a chance to rebuild your home.

LEX: Howard, you didn't know about this before a week ago?

HOWARD: I knew nothing about this.

LEX: You learned about it by going through this process with these and other families?

HOWARD: Yeah, I didn't know anything about this. 48 hours ago, I didn't know anything about this.

LEX: Okay. Are you nervous right now that those apartments are going to go away before you get there with the applications?

HOWARD: No. I've been there three times. I'm a little nervous, but Jessie, who is the apartment manager, knows that if she gives those apartments away, she's going to see a grown man cry. -laughs-

LEX: Okay. Is there anything that people should know in future disasters who get stuck a week after the disaster and they don't know what to do? Where should they turn? Where should these people have turned?

HOWARD: Well, some would say God. But if that's not your ilk then FEMA is a good choice. I think the main thing that people need to remember when they're evacuating is to make sure you have photo ID, to make sure you have a couple of hundred bucks in your pocket, if you can scrape that together. If you can, get your birth certificate and your Social Security card. Because if you lose everything, you'll have to start over and you're almost a persona non grata without those documents.

LEX: What about contacting the aid agencies? These people were fortunate, because they landed in a shelter where there are church workers, where there are social service providers and a caring community, basically.

HOWARD: Right.

LEX: Has that been the experience of people throughout the region, as far as you know?

HOWARD: The experience meaning that they've been able to contact FEMA from those shelters or?

LEX: Yeah.

HOWARD: Yeah. They have been able to contact FEMA with the 1-800 numbers. I believe there's two of them.

LEX: Okay.

HOWARD: And, in fact, there are direct lines open upstairs where you don't even have to dial. You literally just pick up the phone and there's somebody already on the line to answer your questions.

LEX: So your point about getting to one of these resource centers in person is a vital point, in your opinion?

HOWARD: Oh yeah, yeah.

LEX: What about people with disabilities that may be out in a nursing home or a remote shelter? There's no resource center nearby and what would you advise them to do?

HOWARD: If you have a cell phone, you can call FEMA. I know that there are resources available here that will provide transportation. I've got to think that if you can call a FEMA number or a local church, you can get transportation. A cell phone will get you through to FEMA.

LEX: Okay, but you have a lot of faith. Because there's a lot of people who are struggling right now with that particular dilemma.

HOWARD: Is that right?

LEX: Yeah. People who are here are blessed to be in this particular facility.

HOWARD: I've got to agree with you, because I know that the FEMA number for a lot of folks is busy, which is why being here, there's a bank of like 10 phones up there that there is no busy signal, because there's somebody on the line waiting to talk to you.

LEX: These people have been told that FEMA will help them with housing assistance for an extended period of time?

HOWARD: Yes. Yes, and that's the other point that I need to make. There's two horses running side by side on this relief project. Number one is your immediate emergency needs. How are you going to pay for an apartment? How are you going to get a bed and clothes? Okay, that's horse number one. Horse

number two is if you owned a house, you need to make sure that they inspect that house, that FEMA inspects that house and that they give you a settlement. Because they will help you, especially in a disaster of this magnitude. They will help you build a new house, pay to build a new house somewhere. They will find a way to settle up with you. And they'll also provide you with rental assistance for temporary housing for the construction period, up to 18 months.

LEX: Great. Okay. Well, you're an authority now. The people who you're helping here are probably glad to have you as knowledgeable as you are.

HOWARD: Well, you know, you could say that, but honestly, the person who's getting the most out of it is me. It's a blessing and it's a privilege to help folks.

LEX: How many of the people in this shelter would you consider to have disabilities? What percentage?

HOWARD: Well it depends on what you-- I would categorize it. There's two disabilities. There's overt, meaning wheelchair bound, and then there are other disabilities that are related to drug abuse. I don't guess you can really call that a disability, but as far as--

LEX: People with mental health issues.

HOWARD: Mental health issues is what I was thinking. I would say there's a good 10%, you know. 5-10% of the people I've seen would either- would qualify in one of those two categories.

LEX: And you don't know about some of the people who have, as you described, with hidden disabilities.

HOWARD: Well, and it would make sense that some of them would slip through the cracks, if they were suffering from those issues.