

I began my internship in September at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) in the Department of Health and Human Services. At this time Hurricane Katrina had just hit the Southern states and, as a result, I began working in the SAMHSA Emergency Response Center (SERC). In the SERC, I learned about disaster work and how the government and state respond in an emergency.

While at the SERC I was given the opportunity to be deployed to Louisiana to help with the relief work. My assignment would include a two week deployment working with another woman from the SAMHSA office to respond to the request from the director of mental healthcare in Louisiana for the deployment of over 100 mental health workers to cover the state. SAMHSA hired a contractor to assist in organizing these teams. The deployed volunteers were various mental health workers and doctors from all over the United States.

On deployment, our job was to be a SAMHSA point of contact, an ambassador for SAMHSA, the state, and Westover Consultants, the contractor SAMHSA hired to help with the deployment. My specific job was to meet with all the SAMHSA teams that were in the field. I assisted to issue credentials for the volunteers on the teams. The credential requirement addressed a Louisiana law that requires any mental health worker to be licensed in the state. Responding to the emergency, the Louisiana Governor signed a waiver, Executive order #43, to allow the volunteers from all over the country to obtain temporary license.

In carrying out my assignment, I toured the shelters around the state with the teams and assisted in debriefing volunteers and evacuees. I traveled over 2,000 miles to every part of the state and saw first hand the devastation resulting from the storms. The hands-on, first person experience of assisting the relief teams on the ground was incredible. I developed a new perspective and appreciation for the difficulty and sometimes danger involved in being a part of relief work.