

Online Community Aids in Katrina Relief Efforts

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Along with our colleagues in other parts of the tech sector, the search engine community is starting to respond to the devastation Hurricane Katrina left along the northern Gulf coast. Several blogs, forums and search tools have been redesigned, rewritten or refocused to aid in relief efforts. Google, MSN, Yahoo, and Lycos have all announced the development and implementation of tools to assist disaster victims and those who want to help.

Over the past few days, civic officials and police have stated that most of what was New Orleans has been rendered uninhabitable. This condition will not change after the waters are pushed back behind the belatedly reinforced levees. Homes, business and public structures will need to be destroyed or reinforced before a decontamination effort the likes of which has never been contemplated in human history is undertaken. The city will not be livable for months at best.

Refugees, who number in the hundreds of thousands, have lost their homes, possessions and jobs. Everything was washed away, broken or contaminated. There are few paying jobs in a city that no longer exists. The most romantic city in North America has, for all purposes other than relief, simply ceased to be.

Google has added a [Katrina filter](#) to [Google Maps](#) that shows flood damage in most parts of New Orleans. Reports earlier today said that 60% of the city remained under water, down from the peak of 80% in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. Bill Kilday, a member of the Google Earth team, used the [GoogleBlog](#) to explain how images provided by the [NOAA](#) were used to create over 100 map overlays within 24-hours of the hurricane. Brave words aside, nobody knows if the city can be rebuilt in its present location. Having defied the elements for over two hundred years, the great city on the Mississippi delta might ultimately be uninsurable.

The first concern is the health of survivors and reuniting families. During the confusion of the first days, evacuees were sent to dozens of centers in New Orleans and in nearby cities such as Houston, Baton Rouge and Atlanta. Families were divided by urgent necessity and now have no way of contacting their loved ones or friends. The Red Cross is using lists compiled by FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security as the basis of a survivor database. A [FEMA press release](#) issued on Sunday states "Evacuees wishing to inform loved ones of their location can register their name by clicking on "Family Links Registry" on [www.redcross.org](#) or by calling 1 877-LOVED-1S (877-568-3317)."

Both Yahoo and Lycos are also working to provide lists and information resources to Katrina Survivors and the millions around the world who are interested in helping out. They also provide a great deal of news resources culled from the mainstream media, discussion forums and blogs.

Yahoo is using its spidering and directory-sorting technologies to run the [Yahoo People Finder](#), a tool that scours every available survivor and refugee lists with RSS-feeds to provide as up to the minute information as possible.

[Lycos](#) is also spidering survivor lists, media sites and discussion forums to provide a list of names of those impacted in one way or another by Katrina. These lists can be lengthy so people searching them should use the FIND option provided by both Internet Explorer and Firefox browsers.

Arguably the most successful blog of all time, [Craiglist.org](#) has lent the weight of its massive popularity to providing lists of resources for Katrina Survivors. Craigslist provides localized lists with information on finding [Lost Family and Friends](#), locating [Temporary Housing Resources](#) and a [Volunteer Resource List](#) for those who want to help out.

While not an official information site, [Earthlink Hurricane Help](#) is meant to help connect friends and family. Earthlink is one of the largest ISP and web services firms in the states.

On the ground, relief was originally organized and provided on a grassroots level. New Orleans based Hip-Hop artist Master P with wife Sonya Miller emerged to organize the first significant relief effort in the [TeamRescue Mission](#).

TeamRescue, along with a number of other [relief organizations in the black community](#) (list from NYC Pacifica Radio, [WBAI.org](#)) need immediate donations of funds and material supplies. These groups are serving the hardest hit survivors directly in their communities and are likely to get relief donations to those who need them faster and much more efficiently than larger governmental and NGO organizations have been able to.

When we think about helping out, we need to think far into the future. Many who lived in the area will have absolutely nothing to move back to. Homes, family and jobs were swept away. With schools to be closed for at least a year, many are already relocating for good. A migration of hundreds of thousands of people is underway.

Some large corporations like Walmart have announced that employees of stores in affected areas will be able to find jobs within their organization wherever they end up. For many though, the small and medium sized businesses and the tourism trade that supported the city are gone. After reuniting with family and friends, housing and employment will become the pressing concerns for survivors.

The democratic leaning online political movement [MoveOn.org](#) provides two databases for those who need or who can provide housing at [HurricaneHousing.org](#). This registry already includes tens of thousands of offers for temporary housing all over the United States and is continuously updating. People who can provide temporary or permanent housing can register and contact people who need it in their area directly.

In the coming days, it is reasonable to expect the tech world will begin to move its resources toward helping displaced people find work in their new communities. It is also safe to assume the availability of jobs will create migration threads across America as large groups move to where they saw jobs were available. Perhaps access to instantly updating information can help prevent the horrible social upheaval previous mass-migrations have caused. Think Grapes of Wrath.

Already, the largest tech firms are working with the Red Cross to reestablish communication channels between evacuation centers and throughout the area. [Wired News](#) reports that "Intel, Microsoft, Cisco Systems, SBC Communications, Dell and others are working with the Red Cross to build voice and data communications at hundreds of evacuation shelters, and link them together." Most large corporations are

also matching employee relief donations dollar for dollar. According to the Red Cross, over 75% of the \$21 million it has received in donations thus far has come from the Internet.

In New Orleans, two major tech firms have managed to keep up and running from the upper floors of a skyscraper though supplies of diesel fuel for their generator are limited. Again as reported by [Wired](#), New Orleans ISP and web hosting firm Zipa and a related firm, [DirectNIC](#) remained online throughout the hurricane and still continue to provide hosting services. Their Internet connection, a fiber line buried ten stories below the city, survived the disaster intact.

Another way to help survivors is to keep them out of harms way. When disaster strikes, predators come out of the woodwork to prey on people. A post at Threadwatch titled "[The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#)", points out the sadly obvious, scammers are using this tragedy to phish for personal information. It is vitally important that people be aware of the potential for information theft, especially when trying to reunite with loved ones or file for Federal relief funds.

Katrina is the second major test of the grassroots nature of the Internet in a national disaster; one the community has risen to again. It is truly amazing to see how many people want to help and the number of emerging resources being posted across the web. In Washington State alone there are over 1500 offers of immediate housing resources at HurricaneHousing. As the human cost of Katrina is yet to be known, the web community is starting to help individuals move into the new situations they have been thrust into.

The real relief effort is going to take a long time. Every state in the US is going to be effected by an influx of people needing housing and jobs. The assistance will be provided primarily by those NGOs. There is a lot of need at the grassroots level, much of which will need to be met by privately generated funds.

Search marketers might want to think about lending their services to the various NGOs in their area. A search marketing website, [SEMCares.com](#) offers a list of projects SEMs can donate their time and talents to. It also invites SEOs and SEMs to contact local organizations, donate their time and share their experience after.