

**USA TODAY**  
**April 24, 2007**

## **Post-Katrina report: Mental health system deficient in La.**

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I recently visited Louisiana to see firsthand the mental health care system after Hurricane Katrina. My conclusion: There isn't a system.

Instead, there is a severe workforce shortage. There are people in dire need of help.

And there are few, if any, inpatient and rehabilitative services. Experts report a near epidemic of mental health disorders in New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana affected by Hurricane Katrina.

In New Orleans alone, officials report a [threefold increase in suicide](#).

I would have been completely discouraged if I had not met some of the most dedicated mental health and law enforcement professionals I have ever encountered in my career.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, D-La., and legislative leaders still can turn this disaster around.

But they must provide adequate funding and make needed reforms.

I met a woman who was part of a team of mental health professionals who visited individuals in their homes. This is commonly referred to as [Assertive Community Treatment](#) (ACT).

Without regard for her own safety, she ventured out at all hours to provide treatment and care to people living with serious mental illness.

She and her team were able to keep most clients out of the hospital.

But despite its success, the funding for this program is not stable or adequate. If the state made some key changes to its Medicaid program and allocated more funding, it could improve access to this critical service.

But for now, if you live in the area and you have a mental health crisis, it seems you are out of luck. Many people go to the emergency room and wait a long time for an inpatient bed. At one hospital, I saw a log book with entry after entry of people who were seeking a bed.

During my visit, I also spoke with Cecile Tebo, who works with the New Orleans police.

She goes out on 911 calls with the police when they involve a person with a serious mental illness. In most cases, the individuals are so ill they need to go to a hospital.

Hospital workers often meet Tebo on the hospital ramps and discourage her from coming in.

The workers are abusive and angry. The people with mental illnesses whom she helps regularly ask why she brought them to the hospital because it seems health care workers do not want to help them.

Ms. Tebo asked me, "Who will be the voice for these people?"

If the region is to truly recover, leaders must commit to rebuilding the health care system and to specifically addressing the mental health crisis that threatens the future of communities, families and the entire region.