

Independent Media TV

Under Reported

September 06, 2005

1000 FEMA Firefighters Receive Sexual Harrassment Training During Katrina Crisis

By: Lisa Rosetta

Salt Lake Tribune

ATLANTA - Not long after some 1,000 firefighters sat down for eight hours of training, the whispering began: "What are we doing here?"

As New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin pleaded on national television for firefighters - his own are exhausted after working around the clock for a week - a battalion of highly trained men and women sat idle Sunday in a muggy Sheraton Hotel conference room in Atlanta.

Many of the firefighters, assembled from Utah and throughout the United States by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, thought they were going to be deployed as emergency workers.

Instead, they have learned they are going to be community-relations officers for FEMA, shuffled throughout the

Gulf Coast region to disseminate fliers and a phone number: 1-800-621-FEMA.

On Monday, some firefighters stuck in the staging area at the Sheraton peeled off their FEMA-issued shirts and stuffed them in backpacks, saying they refuse to represent the federal agency.

Federal officials are unapologetic.

"I would go back and ask the firefighter to revisit his commitment to FEMA, to firefighting and to the citizens of this country," said FEMA spokeswoman Mary Hudak.

The firefighters - or at least the fire chiefs who assigned them to come to Atlanta - knew what the assignment would be, Hudak said.

"The initial call to action very specifically says we're looking for two-person fire teams to do community relations," she said. "So if there is a breakdown [in communication], it was likely in their own departments."

One fire chief from Texas agreed that the call was clear to work as community-relations officers. But he wonders why the 1,400 firefighters FEMA attracted to Atlanta aren't being put to better use. He also questioned why the U.S. Department of Homeland Security - of which FEMA is a part - has not responded better to the disaster.

The firefighters, several of whom are from Utah, were told to bring backpacks, sleeping bags, first-aid kits and Meals Ready to Eat. They were told to prepare for "austere conditions." Many of them came with awkward fire gear and expected to wade in floodwaters, sift through rubble and save lives.

"They've got people here who are search-and-rescue certified, paramedics, haz-mat certified," said a Texas firefighter. "We're sitting in here having a sexual-harassment class while there are still [victims] in Louisiana who haven't been contacted yet."

The firefighter, who has encouraged his superiors back home not to send any more volunteers for now, declined to give his name because FEMA has warned them not to talk to reporters.

On Monday, two firefighters from South Jordan and two from Layton headed for San Antonio to help hurricane evacuees there. Four firefighters from Roy awaited their marching orders, crossing their fingers that they would

get to do rescue and recovery work, rather than paperwork.

"A lot of people are bickering because there are rumors they'll just be handing out fliers," said Roy firefighter Logan Layne, adding that his squad hopes to be in the thick of the action. "But we'll do anything. We'll do whatever they need us to do."

While FEMA's community-relations job may be an important one - displaced hurricane victims need basic services and a variety of resources - it may be a job best suited for someone else, say firefighters assembled at the Sheraton.

"It's a misallocation of resources. Completely," said the Texas firefighter.

"It's just an under-utilization of very talented people," said South Salt Lake Fire Chief Steve Foote, who sent a team of firefighters to Atlanta. "I was hoping once they saw the level of people . . . they would shift gears a little bit."

Foote said his crews would be better used doing the jobs they are trained to do.

But Louis H. Botta, a coordinating officer for FEMA, said sending out firefighters on community relations makes sense. They already have had background checks and meet the qualifications to be sworn as a federal employee. They have medical training that will prove invaluable as they come across hurricane victims in the field.

A firefighter from California said he feels ill prepared to even carry out the job FEMA has assigned him. In the field, Hurricane Katrina victims will approach him with questions about everything from insurance claims to financial assistance.

"My only answer to them is, '1-800-621-FEMA,' " he said. "I'm not used to not being in the know."

Roy Fire Chief Jon Ritchie said his crews would be a "little frustrated" if they were assigned to hand out phone numbers at an evacuee center in Texas rather than find and treat victims of the disaster.

Also of concern to some of the firefighters is the cost borne by their municipalities in the wake of their absence. Cities are picking up the tab to fill the firefighters' vacancies while they work 30 days for the federal government.

"There are all of these guys with all of this training and we're sending them out to hand out a phone number," an Oregon firefighter said. "They [the hurricane victims] are screaming for help and this day [of FEMA training] was a waste."

Firefighters say they want to brave the heat, the debris-littered roads, the poisonous cottonmouth snakes and fire ants and travel into pockets of Louisiana where many people have yet to receive emergency aid.

But as specific orders began arriving to the firefighters in Atlanta, a team of 50 Monday morning quickly was ushered onto a flight headed for Louisiana. The crew's first assignment: to stand beside President Bush as he tours devastated areas.

lrosetta@sltrib.com

Original Link: http://www.sltrib.com/utah/ci_3004197

© Copyright 2005 **Salt Lake Tribune**

ALL information on this website is for educational purposes ONLY.

FAIR USE NOTICE

This site contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available in our efforts to advance understanding of environmental, political, human rights, economic, democracy, scientific, and social justice issues, etc. We believe this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as

provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, the material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use', you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.

[Home](#)

[Back to Web Version](#)