Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Zondra Anderson

Interviewer: Holly Thomas

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ZONDRRA ANDERSON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Zondra Anderson and is taking place on August 10, 2006. The interviewer is Holly Werner Thomas.

Thomas: Hello. My name is Holly Werner Thomas. This is the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project for The University of Southern Mississippi. Today is Thursday, August 10, 2006, about 10:40 a.m. Today I’m interviewing Zondra Anderson, case manager for Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Fairfax County, at the Northern Virginia Family Services Headquarters in Oakton, Virginia. Zondra, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Anderson: Yes.

Thomas: Excellent. So the reason that I’m interviewing you today, as you know, you’ve been a great help in setting up interviews for me with Hurricane Katrina evacuees from the Gulf Coast, most of whom I’ve interviewed come from New Orleans, but not entirely. I want to know from you how Northern Virginia Family Services [NVFS] became involved and a little bit of background on the 9-11 Project, which was the original project. Can you explain that a bit?

Anderson: OK. I’ll try. Back in September, 2001, after 9-11, the agency was successful in securing funding from the, I want to say the National Area Capital Red Cross funding to provide assistance to families who were affected by the bombing of the Pentagon and the attack on the World Trade Center. We got funding to start the survivors’ fund, and I believe we’re serving up to about 500 families nationwide. And the model that NVFS created was based on the Oklahoma City model in terms of providing case management services to those families. There are several different layers of case management and several phases, which I can’t explain in all their entirety, but in any event having started the survivors’ fund, the agency was approached by Fairfax County to provide case management to Hurricane Katrina families that relocated to Fairfax County. So NVFS was the lead agency along with UCM [United Community Ministries] and Reston Interfaith.

Thomas: And UCM is United Community Ministries.

Anderson: Right. Yeah. To assist these families. So that’s our initial involvement.

Thomas: I don’t know if you can address this question, but I’m curious how the state of Virginia got involved with the evacuees. One of the reasons I’m asking this is because by and large, the people that I interviewed, all fourteen except for one
really—he was twelve; (laughter) so his parents were handling that, (and) I interviewed him with his parents—really complained a lot about the state of Virginia and the reception here, not about this agency, not about Northern Virginia Family Services or even the other agencies, Reston Interfaith or UCM, but about the state in general, you know. A lot of people felt that they came here on their own because they had one friend or one relative, and they sort of meandered their way further and further north, often last-minute decision, very spontaneous sort of decisions about where to go, random almost. But because they didn’t fly in and, say, go to the Washington DC Armory where there was a general reception, that kind of thing, because they weren’t received on a formal level, ever, by the state, they didn’t necessarily feel that there was a way in. And so they would happen across the Red Cross after a few weeks, and that would lead to something, or they would hear word-of-mouth. But there was nothing on the news, you know, broadcast or print, that they usually saw. Things like that. So do you know anything about the process of evacuees in the state of Virginia, how the state was involved originally and how long and then in terms of how you were then given the (inaudible) possibilities?

**Anderson:** I can’t speak on how the state was involved, but my sense from the families that I’ve been working with, as you said, you’re right. Many of them came here because they had a family member, or they knew a friend. So they didn’t go through the DC Armory; some did, but not a whole lot. So because they just ended up here, at random, they weren’t necessarily immediately connected to NVSF, for example, for our program. They may have heard through word of mouth to go to the housing authority and apply for a voucher, or, “You need to go to the Red Cross Center.” And I know that center was put in place not too long after I got started. I mean, the hurricane happened in August, the end of August. I came on board the end of September. So we were in the process of putting the program together; so people didn’t learn about us until after the fact. So it was a matter of trying to get people, get the word out: “We have this program; we have resources that will help you, and this is where you need to go.”

**Thomas:** How did you get the word out?

**Anderson:** We did press releases at all the social service and community organizations. People that the county knew, who they had initially talked to, whether it was food stamps or emergency Medicaid, they were sent letters. And the way the program worked is NVFS handled a certain part of the county; UCM handled another part of the county, and Reston Interfaith handled the north part of the county. So in that letter, they were told, “If you live in the zip codes, then you need to contact Zondra Anderson at NVFS.” So yeah, there was an initial lag time, and like I said, I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that most of these people came here randomly and were not immediately connected to resources because they didn’t know. And not ever having been in a position to ask for resources, whether it was food stamps or emergency Medicaid, that made it kind of difficult.
Thomas: Right, right. Do you know how many people—well, first of all, how many cases are you handling, roughly?

Anderson: In total, I’ve served forty-nine households.

Thomas: Forty-nine households. OK.

Anderson: Yeah, forty-nine households, about one hundred and thirty-something individuals. Right now, I’m down to twenty-seven.

Thomas: Really? And why is that?

Anderson: Some people have moved back; some people have disappeared. And some people have decided they no longer were in need of services.

Thomas: OK. Do you know how many there are in total with the three agencies?

Anderson: Oh, that’s a good question. I should know that. I want to say a little less than a hundred right now.

Thomas: Um-hm, a hundred households.

Anderson: A hundred households, yeah.

Thomas: And do you have any idea what the number is in terms of the number of evacuees in Virginia? Is anybody keeping track of that as far as you know?

Anderson: The county has kept track, and at one point in time, we estimated about close to 200 families, 200 households, not—

Thomas: Just in Fairfax County?

Anderson: Right, just in Fairfax County. We estimate that it’s probably more. As I was saying earlier, there were people who came here who may not have accessed services through the county or us.

Thomas: Right. It’s hard to know.

Anderson: Right. It’s hard to know.

Thomas: One of the women I interviewed said that she’s pretty sure that nobody, meaning county, state, or federal level, is keeping track of how many evacuees there are, how many displaced evacuees, and where they are.

Anderson: They’re keeping track as best they can, based on our numbers.
Thomas: You mean the county, in this case?

Anderson: Yeah, the county. If you haven’t gone through the county for assistance, then they can’t count you. OK? But they’re keeping numbers based on the families and individuals that we’ve seen through the program. But I do believe that there are families out there who are not part of that total figure.

Thomas: Right. Now, do you have any idea the number of displaced persons in the greater Washington DC area? Because I’ve heard as many as a couple of thousand. Does that sound vaguely correct?

Anderson: I’ve heard as many as 5,000 individuals.

Thomas: That’s a lot.

Anderson: Yeah, that’s a lot of people. I was reading an article not too long ago in the Washington Post, which talked about the children in the school systems. It appeared that Maryland had close to maybe [600], 700. DC had very little, which I was very surprised.

Thomas: That is surprising.

Anderson: And Fairfax had almost 300. So the families that came here, even though many of them ended up at the DC Armory, they left, with half coming over here, and the others going to PG [Prince George] County. But I’ve been told about 5,000.

Thomas: PG County being Prince George County, Maryland.

Anderson: Yes.

Thomas: That’s quite a few, yet you don’t hear about it much on the national news.

Anderson: You don’t. Yeah, you don’t.

Thomas: You hear a bit about Atlanta. Of course you hear about Houston, Texas. Really don’t get the information, do you, on a national level about people who have come this far?

Anderson: No.

Thomas: For them this is very far north.

Anderson: Um-hm, very far north. (laughter) Different.

Thomas: Very east, very far north.
Anderson: Yeah.

Thomas: And I’ve heard a little bit about Salt Lake City because it’s so different (inaudible), but I don’t hear that much about the displaced people in general. And I think they don’t feel like they have much of a voice. Is that something that you’ve come across as well?

Anderson: Not necessarily, no. But I think you’re right, and I’m not quite sure why that is. You do hear more about Houston and Atlanta, which is where a lot of the families ended up right after the hurricane. What’s interesting is that Fannie Mae has a program in which they’re renting homes to Katrina evacuees for $1 for eighteen months with the option of purchasing, and all of the families, when we talk to them about it, they all want to go to Atlanta. They all want to go to Atlanta.

Thomas: This is just in Atlanta?

Anderson: It’s nationwide. These are foreclosed houses that are nationwide, and everybody wants to go to Atlanta, and when they pick a house---and you have to move fast on this. They pick a house, and when they investigate, is it available? It’s gone because somebody else got it.

Thomas: I see. So you have to move very fast.

Anderson: Yeah, you have to be very fast. And that’s with the other agencies, but most of my families want to remain here.

Thomas: Right. Now that they’ve made this move.

Anderson: Yeah, now that they’ve made this move, yeah. But going back to your initial statement, I don’t know why that is, that there’s not been a focus on (inaudible) evacuees who have moved to Virginia and into Maryland. But there was a significant number.

Thomas: Yes. What is it about Atlanta? Is it because they have relatives there?

Anderson: I think Atlanta probably is reminiscent of New Orleans. One, Atlanta is predominantly African-American.

Thomas: And it’s Southern.

Anderson: And it’s Southern, and those two things (laughter) right there.

Thomas: For all the differences.

Anderson: And it is close to what used to be home; so they could get back. I don’t think there would be a problem.
Thomas: And the weather.

Anderson: Yeah, and the weather.

Thomas: A little bit. Let’s see. Do you know—I’m just interested in the fact that the other two sort of agencies, United Community Ministries and Reston Interfaith, are religious organizations, faith-based organizations. Is that correct?

Anderson: Um-hm. Well, Reston Interfaith is more faith-based. United Community Ministries is just nonprofit community.

Thomas: Is it? OK. I’m just wondering, just briefly to address, how, again, how the state of Virginia decided upon, say, instead of another social services agency, why Reston Interfaith? Was it because Reston Interfaith volunteered, or can you say?

Anderson: Well, I think it’s directly the agencies NVFS included have been major players in providing human services to that moderate-income-level community. And they’ve been around for so long and have established themselves as being quality agencies that deliver top-notch services, not beating my own horn. But our agency does a lot of work with Fairfax County, and so does Reston Interfaith and UCM. In fact, we have a transitional housing program that we run together that’s monitored by the county and funded by HUD. But I just think it’s that history of being visible in the community and being in specific locations to carry this out.

Thomas: One thing I found, interviewing everyone, is that various churches have helped, have stepped in to help; whereas the experience with agencies like the Red Cross and of course the federal government, which has been by and large negative, although not entirely, but mostly, versus private organizations, of course like the insurance companies, and nobody I’ve spoken with has had an easy time with their insurance companies. Most homeowners I’ve spoken with—I think all—have not received any money and have been told by their insurance companies that they’re not going to no matter what kind of insurance they had. But churches in general whether on the road here, whether in Louisiana, in Arkansas, Tennessee, or here, have really stepped in to help in terms of donations, particularly with furniture and clothing, and also in terms of moral support. Is that something that you’ve heard from interviewees or just that you know (inaudible)?

Anderson: Oh, no question. The churches in the area have been a big source of support for us in terms of administering the program. What we’ve tried to do as families were being referred to us, we would try to hook them up with a church organization that called us, “What can we do? How can we help?” Again, if you get on Fairfax County’s website, it lists us and phone numbers that people can call. And in the beginning we were overwhelmed by churches and church organizations. So as I was saying, we would try to connect families with a religious institution to help out
with furnishing their apartment that they’ve gotten rent-free or housing that somebody donated.

**Thomas:** Right. So that’s one of the connections that you make?

**Anderson:** Right. Catholic diocese did a remarkable job in pulling all the agencies together and using their churches to adopt a family and volunteer to give furniture and that kind of thing. In fact, we still rely on them for financial assistance, as family still need help in paying their utilities or rent because some are paying rent here, and mortgage back home. But the churches, yeah, they have been a big source of support for all the agencies.

**Thomas:** Right. I have to say the housing authority has not necessarily come through for a lot of the interviewees. People have been told by—they’re frustrated because they’ve been told by the housing authority that they’re applying too late for a voucher, and they’re frustrated sometimes with the Red Cross because they thought the Red Cross was available for six months or so, but then not after that in terms of if you’re—

**Anderson:** Some of the people—not to cut you off—as I’m thinking. Some of the people that you interviewed, at least from our agency, what the housing authority did was they got a special permission from HUD to issue one-year Katrina vouchers, and then other people got permanent vouchers, and that’s been a blessing for a lot of our families because without those vouchers, at least my folks wouldn’t be able to stay here. But the Katrina vouchers and some of the other housing systems, what the families have to remember, first, as I said earlier, if they didn’t get to the housing authority when they first got here, then the vouchers were gone.

**Thomas:** Just gone; there’s only so many available.

**Anderson:** Yeah, there’s only so many, and then people who got the Katrina vouchers for one year may or may not have been eligible for a voucher under any normal circumstances. So I think there’s a disconnect there; it’s like people who initially got the food stamps and the emergency Medicaid, well, outside of Hurricane Katrina, would they have been eligible for that service back in New Orleans? No. So they’re not going to get it now. So I think people, there is a disappointment that they didn’t get a voucher because they weren’t in line first, but the realities are, would they have been eligible anyway? It was only going to be a short-term solution. It’s frustrating.

**Thomas:** Just to follow up with that, and it is frustrating.

**Anderson:** It’s frustrating.

**Thomas:** And this is not about Northern Virginia Family Services, but just to mention this, sort of on the record, I think they’re frustrated, too, because—and I’m sure you’ve heard this: no, they would not have been able to access that kind of help
under normal circumstances, but nor would they have needed to, whereas they need to now. And a lot of the frustration I hear is, applying too late from an official point of view; from their point of view, “Well, we just found out this was even available, and here we are. And you’re telling me that I’m not suffering. Yet it’s been less than a year, or it’s only been six or eight months since the hurricane. And I just found out.” That kind of thing. So there really is a frustration with kind of the official policies of a lot of agencies or the lack of continuity or continuousness, I guess, with some of these. But in terms of what Northern Virginia Family Services can do, what are some of the things that you do, talking about transitional housing?

Anderson: Initially, in the beginning we were fortunate enough through our relationship with some of the property management companies in the area. KSI for example, approached us and offered us units for Katrina families, which we did put families in these units with leases in our name. Another property came through and offered thirty units, one bedrooms and (inaudible) one bedrooms to families for ten months, which just ended, end of June, to help families stabilize in transition. And we helped people; people who were able to get housing on their own, we helped with security deposits and first month’s rent. We have several housing programs in NVFS that help with—we call it eviction-prevention programs that we help people with rent and security deposits, plus the program had direct assistance funds, as we call them, to help with financial needs, and housing was a big one. So we also help, as a case manager, my job is to help people access whatever resources are there through FEMA.

Thomas: Ah, that’s a big help.

Anderson: Initially they were giving out housing assistance for rent; people mentioned they were getting up to I think $2,538, which is only three months, to help pay their rental costs. But then they can reapply. A lot of that has become very strict now because you have to have proof that you actually live in the unit, and that you’re paying. But that’s part of my job is to go and seek out available resources. I mean, I’ve contacted landlords myself and gotten clients into housing because the landlord knew that they would be getting the FEMA assistance. So that’s how we try to work out things.

Thomas: Housing for most people from the Gulf Coast in this market is extremely expensive. So that’s something they talk about, the cost of living, and that’s an issue that I’m sure displaced evacuees are dealing with all over the United States. But I know that this area, Washington DC greater metropolitan area, is quite expensive, on par with, say, Los Angeles.

Anderson: Yeah, everybody (laughter) was in culture shock when they heard the rents.

Thomas: Yeah, much different from New Orleans, for sure.

Anderson: Yeah, much different.
Thomas: And definitely the Mississippi Gulf Coast, as well.

Anderson: That was a biggie. And as I said earlier, for many of my families who got vouchers, that’s the only way they could stay here. That’s the only way. Like I said, I had a few who were able to get housing on their own, and we helped out with security deposit and that kind of thing, but that is a biggie. We’ve tried to help people specifically who are still paying a mortgage. We really tried to get those folks into some free housing, and we have one family where we’re paying half the rent, and the church is paying another half of the rent until this person can figure out what to do. And we’re paying her rent through next April; the program ends in December, but at least this will give this woman time enough to figure out what she’s going to do at the end of that time. But that is a big one, the rent.

Thomas: Yes, it’s huge for people.

Anderson: And many of them are managing.

Thomas: What about in terms of employment or educational transitional things? Because one thing I’m also hearing, one gentleman I spoke with, he’s not with this agency; he’s with Reston Interfaith, the Ahmad family. He was a cabdriver in New Orleans, and he said here it’s difficult, actually, to be a cabdriver. It’s expensive, and he tried to go to a community college to transition into becoming a commercial driver, but they would make him pay out-of-state tuition, which was several thousand dollars versus $500 for in state. So he felt that that was a dead end, and he still is out of work, and he’s not sure—the rent is paid for a while, but he’s not sure how long that’s going to last. They’re out by Dulles Airport in an apartment, and it’s a family of [five]. So I hear these kinds of dead-end stories. And what position are you in to help people in terms of the transition with employment?

Anderson: Well, we have several training programs here that I know that I’ve gotten a couple of my folks into. We have a construction kind of like on-the-job-training program. And then we have a computer course, health-care course training program that I’ve gotten a couple of my folks in, too. I can’t speak on the gentleman that you’re talking about, but that would be something, as a case manager, I would look into because now that he’s here, he should be considered a resident. I know a lot of schools may have a time period; it could be a year or whatever, but I would certainly look into that. But that would be part of what I would do. And then the other thing is, again, if somebody’s interested in going to community college—I haven’t had anyone do that, but that would be something that I would encourage people to do. I had one young lady who signed up to go to nursing school. She didn’t have any problem. So I guess each situation is different. And the schools in the beginning were begging for people to come and register for (inaudible) for that.

Thomas: Really?
Anderson: Yeah, so again I can’t—

Thomas: Which is a much more welcoming—

Anderson: Yeah, so again, I can’t speak on the situation that you’re talking about, but you’re right. Again, a lot of the families, if they’re going to stay here, I mean, we tell them, “The cost of living is high. You’re going to have to have an income that’s going to have to support that.” And unfortunately across the agencies, many have not met that and have had to go back home; home meaning New Orleans or wherever they can go because it is unaffordable here. I mean, it’s very high, and so we’ve been very upfront with people. Again, that’s part of what our jobs are, is to let people know, “OK. We’ve got you stable right now. We’ve got you in a position where you can think about the realities of the pros and cons of staying here or going back or going somewhere. And we want people to know that, and if you plan to stay here, what is your plan?”

Thomas: Right. A lot of people have children and want to at least provide some [stability], including this gentleman and his wife, at least provide some stability for their children, for the near future. They don’t want to pick them up and put them in another school. Their eldest son who’s twelve who I also spoke with had been in three or four different schools this school year, and they just don’t want to do that to him anymore for obvious reasons. So they don’t have any immediate plans to go back to New Orleans, nor do they have—most people don’t. As you know, there are all these kind of catch twenty-two situations because there’s not work in New Orleans, or they don’t have insurance money. In fact, one of my questions for you is what I have found, one of the greatest frustrations that people have is the feeling of being in limbo. So they’re either waiting to find out about insurance, or they have not received anything so they can’t move forward. Some of the people are retired; some of the people are—one was on medical leave. Others have medical issues that prevent them from working, all kinds of reasons, and as we were talking about, the cost of living is so much higher here. So it’s very difficult for them to put down roots here to even begin to just live on a regular basis here. What are some of the frustrations that you’ve come across?

Anderson: You (laughter) just named a few.

Thomas: Did I?

Anderson: Again, the biggest one is—and I don’t want to single out; there’s frustrations for all the families, but the biggest one that I’ve seen is the people who are homeowners who have not received anything from the insurance companies, but are still required to pay mortgages on homes that just aren’t there or either uninhabitable. In trying to—

Thomas: And they’re required to pay mortgages?
Anderson: Yes, and trying to pay rent here; again, those are the people that we’ve tried to reach out to partner with a church to help pay their rent or put them in some type of free housing during this transition. And until they can find an answer or get an answer from the insurance company or like I mentioned earlier, both the state of Mississippi and Louisiana have these programs where people can apply to either repair, rebuild, or relocate; until they get an answer from that, they’re kind of stuck. That money is starting to be released, but I haven’t heard from any of my clients in terms of whether or not they’ve been accepted or will receive it, but that’s been a big, major frustration with no support from FEMA, the feds, or anybody. It’s just not there. The other source [of] frustration, people who have worked for the federal government, USDA, which I think is down in New Orleans. I have one person; they would not allow her to transfer her job here, and they wanted her to go back and live in a trailer three hours from the job. And she said no; well, she got laid off. She’s trying to, what do you call it? Grieve that in hopes that they will make a decision in her favor, but that’s been a big source of frustration. And another woman who also worked for the federal government, she was able to retire because she had enough years. And then she got a job as a contract, government-contract worker. Her and her husband are doing real well.

Thomas: So it worked out a little bit better.

Anderson: Yeah, it worked out better, but just not getting support from your job, having to pay the mortgages, your kids, as you mentioned, getting them to adjust. The kids have had a terrible time.

Thomas: Have they?

Anderson: The middle-school kids and high school, leaving behind all their friends or having been popular in school, and now you’re here, and—

Thomas: And not knowing anybody.

Anderson: You don’t know anybody, and people are looking at you like you’re a leper. You’re from Louisiana. I’ve had several parents tell me that their children, if they should ever go back to New Orleans, they’ve threatened (laughter) not to come back because they just miss it so much. They miss it. I mean, everybody misses it, but the kids—

Thomas: Yeah, I’ve never seen such homesickness.

Anderson: Yeah.

Thomas: It’s incredible.

Anderson: Yeah, that is amazing to me, a real strong sense of community.
Thomas: Extremely strong.

Anderson: That’s very strong. I’m from Cleveland, Ohio, and I thought Clevelanders were like that, but they’ve got us beat. They’re very homesick.

Thomas: Yeah, I’ve never seen anything like that, and the sense of loss, I think, is not just being away from home for a while. It’s this grieving process because not being able to go back and wondering if the community will ever be intact again, which also I think is playing into this feeling of being in limbo. And also people do tend to feel quite isolated here because the geography is very different; it’s not compact. Northern Virginia is very sprawled out, and it takes a long time to get from point A to point B.

Anderson: Right. I hear about that all the time. You just can’t walk out of your house and walk to the grocery store or walk over to your cousin’s house in the next block. You have to get in a car or take the bus and very isolated.

Thomas: Right and a feeling of culture shock in the sense, too, of—at least this is what I’m hearing; people feel that people who live here are overly efficient. And nobody knows their neighbors, and it’s all about going to work early and getting home late and working very hard. But you’re not in each other’s lives at all, and they feel that that’s a little strange, as well. Is there anything else you’d like to add in terms of frustrations or hopes that people have? Fears?

Anderson: I think that’s the biggest one; those are some of the biggest ones, rather. Just the whole living in limbo and not knowing; the uncertainty of whether New Orleans will be rebuilt or whether they can go back or whether it’ll be the same.

Thomas: Do you have anybody from Mississippi?

Anderson: I do. I had two from Mississippi, but I have a family, now. And actually they’re doing quite well; I’m very proud of them. Their house was completely destroyed, and they did not have flood insurance because they were told they didn’t need it. But they did have, I guess, homeowner’s insurance. Well, the homeowner’s insurance wouldn’t pay out and neither would FEMA. So they were stuck, but they still had to pay that mortgage. And we put them in one of our free units that we leased, and they stayed there for a while. He couldn’t get work because he didn’t have a picture ID, and it was not until February where he was able to get one and finally got a job. She, the wife, couldn’t work because they have a son, a seven-year-old son who’s bipolar and attention deficit disorder, and she needed to be at home because the school called frequently. To make a long story short, he started working. The child made some improvements in school. They did apply for this grant that I was telling you about through the state of Mississippi. We paid for them to travel back to Mississippi so they could have an interview. You had to have a face-to-face interview, and it does look like they’re going to get the money. In the meantime, their lease was up in July; what they decided to do is they took jobs as comangers at a storage company not far from where they live so they can work on site. And they also
have a free unit. So they don’t have to pay rent, which allows them to continue to pay their mortgage, and they can both earn an income. And if something should happen to the child at school, the wife or the father can go and check while one of them stays and manages the office. So it’s really a neat kind of setup, and it looks like they’re going to be accepted to get this money. So they’re going to stay here for a while and try to save, pay off their mortgage to their house and try to rebuild their lives. And they’ve just been remarkable, so much so to the point where they’re in a position to offer jobs to Katrina (laughter) evacuees.

Thomas: You’re kidding!

Anderson: Right. They have part-time (laughter)—

Thomas: That’s amazing.

Anderson: —positions available. I just saw them last week.

Thomas: That’s really wonderful.

Anderson: And they’re doing really good, but they have really—talk about some of the frustrations and struggles; that family has been through a lot.

Thomas: It’s funny because some people have definitely been through more than other people. One woman I talked to, she actually had never evacuated, lived in New Orleans all her life, never had evacuated before, decided to this time and managed to bring things like pots and pans and a lot of keepsakes. And she said, “I must be blessed in that way.” And she had a friend here who she had visited previously; so she already knew people from the neighborhood, and they helped her; whereas other people felt that they had a really cold reception in Virginia and just had to do everything themselves, and it took that much longer because they didn’t know Virginia, they didn’t know anybody.

Anderson: And I think that’s fair to say. As we were saying earlier, there were some people unless you started off at the DC Armory or ended up in the social services system, it was hard. It’s hard, particularly if you don’t know anybody, and then being traumatized in the beginning, having gone through whatever experience you’ve gone through, that makes it more frustrating.

Thomas: And feeling like you can’t go back, or that you’ve lost everything, your whole life history, which many people feel, of course, because all their keepsakes are gone, or they’ve had to spend their savings or retirement money refurbishing their house, getting new roofs on or whatever the case may be, all that kind of thing. You said that you originally had forty-nine families; now it’s down to twenty-seven. Are you still accepting people?
Anderson: Actually I took a gentleman last month, and again, here’s someone, he came from New Orleans, spent a little time in, I want to say Jacksonville, Mississippi, and ended up in northern Virginia in February. I think the Catholic Charities in DC helped him get a house, which he was renting, and they paid his rent for about three months. He actually enrolled in one of our training classes here, construction training and knew about the program. But I guess he felt he’s got his house, Catholic Charities paying his rent, he’s in training, he’d be OK. What happened was, one of the workers here did a presentation on site where he’s getting this training and mentioned the Katrina Project, and he was having some financial difficulties, and he called me. And I went out to visit him and his wife and his family, lovely family. And as it turns out, he’ll be finishing training in the next few weeks, but he’s behind in his rent now because they only agreed to pay his rent for about three months. So we’re assisting him with his rent, and I’m helping him to navigate the FEMA system because he is eligible for the FEMA housing assistance money. But, yeah, I took him in last month, but he would be one of these people who, “I’m doing OK. I don’t necessarily need the service, but when that free ride stops, people are starting to call.” And that’s what we’ve been seeing in the last—

Thomas: Have you seen that?

Anderson: In the last few months, yeah.

Thomas: Right. I can see that because some of the people I interviewed, say in May and June, were right on the cusp of having their leases come up, and they really didn’t know what they were going to do. And these people had been homeowners in New Orleans mostly, and have lost everything and were given this free rent for a while. Have you had anybody—probably not but—that you’re aware of, really out on the street as a result, or are there safety nets still in place?

Anderson: I don’t know of anybody out on the streets now, but there might be. And I don’t think that’s necessarily because there’s no safety net, and I can’t speak entirely for this person, but I do know of some clients that have not been able to move forward, not because they don’t have the resources, but because there are other issues, whether it be mental health issues or they need to be connected and because of that, they may end up homeless. And again, that was something that they brought with them and were put in these situations without case management, without supports, and now that a lot of that support is going to be cut, now they’re calling for help, but—

Thomas: At least they’re calling for help. Some people I’ve spoken to don’t know who to call, to be honest. And one woman, two I think, were worried about being homeless and weren’t sure. What about counseling? Have you noticed that people need a lot of emotional and psychological counseling?

Anderson: It varies from family to family, naturally. Some people, I think, go through the normal ups and downs of dealing with the loss, the grieving, the transitioning here, the fact that, “I’ve lost everything.” I may have clients who sound
good one week, but then the next week they call me because something made them think about their loss; they’re grieving. The bad rains that we had last month triggered a lot of calls and sadness in people. It could be anything. And then there are some who are in counseling because we referred them to counseling. Some have gone to counseling on their own to deal with some of the situations and things that are happening. I’ve had people who (laughter) want to use me as their counselor, who say they want to go, and we encourage them to call and make an appointment, but they don’t go. They (laughter) call me instead, and I think that’s a new concept for some of our clients, not ever having been in that position before, or the fact that you need it, may possibly show a sign of weakness or something. And I’ve had to walk people through that process, that, “This is normal; this is what happens after a traumatic event.” But, yes, it’s come up.

**Thomas:** Would you go as far as to say it’s post-traumatic stress?

**Anderson:** For some it might be. I can’t; I’m not a clinician anymore, but for others, I think it’s situational, extreme stress. And like I said, it’s in stages; the trauma could have been during the hurricane, after the hurricane when the levees broke, and the stress, but over time it becomes the stress of transitioning, the grieving, the loss, the depression. But I don’t see—

**Thomas:** Not knowing the future is a big thing.

**Anderson:** Yeah, right.

**Thomas:** Which goes back to the limbo; not being able to see a future. Sort of just constant lack of understanding, “Where am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What about my children?”

**Anderson:** Right. I think seeing things on TV; I don’t know what the response is going to be at the first year.

**Thomas:** I know.

**Anderson:** That’s kind of scary; that’s new territory for us. I know the Survivors’ Fund has dealt with that, but I’ve not. I don’t know. We want to do something, have an observance or something, but we don’t want to focus on the negative, but more, “Where do we go from here?” But, yeah, that’s going to be interesting to see how that plays itself out with people.

**Thomas:** What is the Survivors’ Fund?

**Anderson:** The Survivors’ Fund are the families that have been affected by the events of 9-11.

**Thomas:** So 9-11.
Anderson: Right.

Thomas: So that’s the five-year anniversary.

Anderson: Right, exactly. The five-year anniversary coming up, but yeah, it’ll be interesting to see the reaction of our families because I know the TVs and the newspapers and magazines are going to be full of it. And it’s one thing for them to talk about it amongst themselves, but everybody else, you know, yeah.

Thomas: How long will Northern Virginia Family Services be involved?

Anderson: The Fairfax piece of the program actually ends at the end of September, but we’re going to—we have additional funding, NVFS, where we can take the program out to the end of the year.

Thomas: To the end of the year?

Anderson: Um-hm.

Thomas: What have been some of your frustrations and victories as a case manager?

Anderson: The frustrations, even though they’re mostly the clients, but the roadblocks and the barriers, whether it’s through the insurance company or FEMA or resources that we haven’t been able to access, those are some of the frustrations as a case manager that I see. And again that’s part of my job to connect them, but if it’s not there to connect, then that’s a source of frustration for me as a case manager. (Inaudible), “Well, how can I make this work?”

Some of the successes is being able to overcome some of those by putting people in houses, by connecting people with the churches, by helping people with furniture donations and helping people with medical prescriptions. We’ve had several people who have various illnesses who needed to see doctors, connecting with them with clinics so they could get ongoing health care, getting their prescription medications, which you know can be a very high cost. But just being able to do that and seeing people grow over time. Everything’s not 100 percent, but I’ve seen a progression in my clients in spite of living in limbo, in spite of not knowing, in spite of what has happened. I mean, I’ve never seen a bunch of people with such resilience, and (inaudible) ought to just keep going. And that’s been very positive and inspiring to me, very inspiring.

Thomas: What happens beginning in 2007? So Northern Virginia Family Services, their role is finished.

Anderson: Um-hm.
Thomas: What if people call after that? Also let me ask, do you anticipate that some of your individuals and families will still need help at that time?

Anderson: I think they might need just the emotional support, and I am in no way in a position to speak on what I’m going to be doing. I hope that I’m still here, and I think the long-term goal of the agency is to create sort of like a disaster-relief division in lieu of 9-11 and Katrina. And we’ve had a terrorist threat today. This isn’t going to go anywhere, and it might be possible to put in an aftercare program where you can contact people three, six months, a year after they’ve been closed out to just check and see how they’re doing. But in an ideal world, that’s what I’d like to see happen; it may happen, but I don’t know when.

Thomas: Finances pending, probably.

Anderson: Yeah.

Thomas: OK. Is there anything that we haven’t covered that you think is important in terms of the structure with your agency and the others, the state of Virginia or the people who’ve been under your care?

Anderson: No. Like I said, I’m not equipped to talk about the state of Virginia and their involvement, but I think NVFS having been a part of the Survivors’ Fund was, I think, very at the forefront of providing these kind of services, which is why they were contacted from the county and has created this model to help people. I’ve enjoyed it immensely because, unlike the Survivors’ Fund—many of the clients they deal with on the phone—I’m able to see my people. One of the first things I do when I get a client or a referral is go out to see them in their environment, and that has been the most rewarding thing for me and has helped in terms of establishing a relationship with the families so that we can work (inaudible) and work together, trying to stabilize the situation.

Thomas: Why is that the most rewarding aspect?

Anderson: I love people. I’m a case manager by heart, and I just really enjoy seeing people in their element, in their environment. I think it sets the tone in terms of that future relationship. Most of what we do is based on that relationship and connecting with our families and our clients and the fact that many of them, even if they knew where I was at, early on, they probably didn’t know how to get here. They know now, but back in their early days, it just made more sense.

Thomas: It helps.

Anderson: Right. They were staying in hotels or in temporary settings; it just made more sense for me to go see them.

Thomas: Not everybody has transportation.
Anderson: Right.

Thomas: (Inaudible) difficult. Have you been contacted by other agencies in other states regarding this model? I know that the Survivors’ Fund came out of the Oklahoma City.

Anderson: Right. I’m sure they have, but not myself, personally. But I’m sure that they have, yeah.

Thomas: OK. All right. Well, thank you so much for your time.

Anderson: Thank you.

Thomas: I know that we’ll be in contact; so if you have any further comments, then you can always contact me. Now ends the interview with Zondra Anderson. It’s about 11:25.

(end of interview)