



State Emergency Operations Center

Joint Information Center

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Volunteers make free donation store for tornado survivors

SMITHVILLE, MS -- Three weeks after a devastating EF-5 tornado destroyed the town of Smithville, residents find new beginnings in a massive furniture store warehouse now fully stocked with donations – food, water, clothing, furniture, medicine – all basic items that give this community hope for a new start.

People from nearby towns like Amory and Becker, and faraway towns in Oklahoma, Illinois, Texas and Michigan, have come to Smithville with donations and open hearts to help those who've lost everything put the pieces of their lives and homes back together.

The United Way of Greater Monroe County, Amory Food Pantry volunteers, Monroe County Emergency Management Director Robert "Bunky" Goza, Pontotoc Emergency Management Agency Director Ricky Jagers and others stepped in days after the tornado and worked with the owners of Townhouse Furniture to use their warehouse, one of the few structures left standing in Smithville, to create a free store for residents to shop for all the things they need to rebuild their homes.

Jagers advised Smithville and Monroe County volunteers and responders to organize their donations in a central location as soon as possible after the storm. He helped jump start the operation in Smithville by offering his experience following a tornado outbreak in his county in 2001 when he worked with the local food pantry to organize a similar donation distribution point for storm survivors.

"It's not pretty, but it's functional," Jagers said. "It came together with a lot of people putting their heads together and finding a central point where people can bring stuff."

Before opening the store, volunteers hauled out thousands of stacked couches, mattresses and other furniture to make room for basic necessities for storm survivors.

People find the store by word-of-mouth directions and cardboard signs with arrows. When volunteers get to Smithville they drive past mounds of debris and turn onto the street with a severely damaged Piggly Wiggly grocery store. The warehouse is just past the Piggly Wiggly on the right. It's open Monday-Saturday for volunteers and shoppers. A faded United Way sign hangs beside the door.

An average of 75 volunteers sign up daily to help sort and organize the donations and assist storm survivors with shopping for the goods they need.

"This is my first time volunteering and it won't be my last," said Christine Newell of Mineola, Texas, as she unloaded boxes on Sunday, May 15.

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Smithville store for tornado survivors
May 16, 2011

Patti Parker, a Smithville resident who survived the tornado, is also the director of the Monroe County United Way. Despite having lost all of her material possessions, Parker was able to work with the local emergency managers and food pantry to organize the donation store in Smithville.

When residents enter the store, their information, needs and whether they suffered full, partial or limited loss is recorded in a client database. The shopper's information is cross referenced with their FEMA registration numbers and the information collected from local and state emergency management officials. Once verified, volunteers help people get every item they need. The database allows the nonprofit to track how many survivors are visiting the store, how often, and what needs are unmet.

"We're working really, really hard to keep fraud to a minimum," Parker said. "The computer system is perfect for our needs and helps us help the people who need it the most."

Being a tornado survivor herself, Parker understands the difficulty some people may have in getting basic items they need to start their lives over again. She has reached out to people beyond Smithville to make sure all residents affected by the April storm have their needs met. The store makes deliveries to victims in Wren and throughout the county.

"We verify people's needs and send them everything we can," Parker said.

Linda Holden, a volunteer from Amory who also runs the local food pantry and was integral to helping Parker organize the donation store, said she's been moved by the kindness of volunteers and by the people who've come from towns still recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

"People from the coast, the victims of Katrina, bring in items and ask if they can just hug the shoppers," Holden said. "They tell them that it's going to be okay. That there is hope. And to hear that from them, from people who've been through Katrina, it means so much."

Mike Steele of Becker, a small community between Amory and Aberdeen, used vacation time from his job to help his neighbors in Smithville.

"I didn't know where I was going, or what I was going to do," Steele said. "I was just coming to help." Steele said that being a part of the volunteer recovery efforts has been a blessing for him. With tears in his eyes, he shared stories about all the volunteers and the tornado survivors he's met in the recent weeks.

Steele described a man who came right before the store was going to close for the day. The man pulled up and opened the trunk of his car which had a few items in a plastic bin, probably only worth about \$10 total, Steele said.

"I thought he looked like he needed help, but he said he wanted to make a donation," Steele said. Steele thanked the man and started taking away the plastic bin of items, but the man said he was going to need the bin back.

"It was all he had," Steele said. "Then as he drove off I noticed that his tag said Alabama. To be from a community also hit by the tornado and to do that, it just touches you."

Thanks to the generosity of people throughout Mississippi and the country, the warehouse donation store is stacked with plenty of the basic necessities, but the United Way of Greater Monroe County is still accepting monetary donations and furniture for those recovering from the April tornado. Many residents have found temporary spaces to rent while they find or build new homes, but they do not have any furnishings.

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To donate, contact the local United Way by calling 662-257-0557, by e-mailing unitedway@monroecountyunitedway.org or send mail to P.O. Box 612, Amory, Miss., 38821. People may also find out about helping tornado survivors by visiting helpsmithville.com. People may also make donations to the Mississippi Disaster Relief Fund established by Governor Haley Barbour by visiting www.mississippirelief.com.

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