Volunteers aid in Lafayette flood recovery effort

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More than 2,200 volunteers from across the country and around the world will get a taste of Acadian culture this week as they aid Lafayette Parish residents still recovering from the August floods.

Members and volunteers for Eight Days of Hope, a Christian nondenominational organization based in Tupelo, Mississippi, pitched tents, parked RVs and rolled out sleeping bags around the Cajun Heartland State Fair grounds. They’ll be working with the community through June 11.

In their first day of service, volunteers served some 70-80 households, said Steve Tybor III, executive director of Eight Days of Hope.

Volunteers began their first day with dancing led by Tybor, in addition to prayer and readings from the Bible. The Cajundome lobby walls were lined with fliers detailing...

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projects the volunteers could participate on that day. Service options ranged from plumbing to painting from Demanade Drive in Lafayette to Market Road in Opelousas.

“We have never seen this much support from a community,” he said.

Job management workers such as Bethany Robinson, a Gonzales resident, managed the paper flow from board to record book. Robinson’s participation in Lafayette’s Eight Days of Hope marks her third year of service with the organization, which she said enriches her personal approach to positive change.

“I’ve seen them do it in humility and just with excellence,” she said. “The way that they show their love of Christ to the people that they help is absolutely incredible.”

Eight Days of Hope began as a one-time initiative to aid residents in Waveland, Mississippi, affected by Hurricane Katrina. Its first trip outside its home state brought volunteers to Lake Charles, where 1,277 volunteers aided victims of Hurricane Rita. Other stops in previous years have been Nashville, Tennessee; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and support from Hartford County, North Carolina. The organization also holds rapid response events for areas struck by natural disasters such as tornadoes.

Tyler said this year’s turnout — as well as support from Lafayette City-Parish Mayor-President Joel Robideaux and organizations sponsoring the event — will be a record-breaker, assisted by more than 400 volunteers who live within 20 miles of Lafayette registering for the organization’s eighth annual disaster recovery trip.

“A 12-year-old record’s going to be broken because Louisiana — namely Lafayette Parish and its surroundings — does not want to have flood water to give back,” he said. “I’m excited that so many people from Lafayette get a chance to be a part of something way bigger than just themselves.”

In addition to helping hands, the local and state community also provided financial assistance to the nonprofit’s projects. Eight Days of Hope’s trip was made possible by over $500,000 raised by community efforts, including $200,000 from the United Way of Acadiana and the American Red Cross, $250,000 from Lafayette’s Roman Catholic Diocese and $50,000 from other donors. The group also partnered with Love Acadiana, an organization that connects businesses to faith-based communities, as well as the Acadiana Long Term Recovery Committee, a coalition of service groups, religious organizations and government services. The ALTRC gathered a list of homes affected by flooding. Love Acadiana, the local United Way and the local Red Cross are all members of the group.

Niki Chiles, a New Albany, Mississippi, resident and longtime volunteer, said the support from Lafayette organizations has been almost unmatched by previous years’ collaborative efforts.

“I don’t know that we’ve had an organization like them be such a strong partner and so welcoming and just really feel like a partner — not because of title, but actually by action,” she said.

Chiles, in her seventh year of service, said volunteers’ “drive to make God known” benefits the team members as well as the affected residents.

“Honestly, we help each other in our own journey in life, even when we’re volunteering,” she said.