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SSA 

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BREAKING NEWS - July 2, 2010

SSA Again Slow to React as Category 2 Hurricane Approaches Southern Texas

For nearly a week, media outlets reported that a hurricane was developing in the Gulf of Mexico and was headed toward the coast of Texas. It was expected to be one of the most dangerous weather systems to hit this year, but all of that was apparently a surprise to management officials at Social Security.

In Brownsville, Texas, employees were told to report to work Wednesday morning even as Hurricane Alex moved dangerously close to their community. Some of them were single parents who worried about the safety of their children. Others had to travel 30 miles one-way through perilous rain to get to the office.

And even as employees continued to work (nervously, wondering if they'd be allowed to go home), sandbags were placed in front of the emergency exits at the Brownsville office, which could have created an even more hazardous situation if the staff had to leave in a hurry.

As many other public and private organizations were shutting down, AFGE made numerous calls to SSA management, asking what they were planning to do. The agency's responses were vague at best. The Union was told that local managers did not have the authority to close their offices (which is not true) and "someone" at the Area or Regional level would have to make that decision.

When the agency did react to the situation, it was apparently more concerned about promoting Direct Deposit than the health and safety of the many employees and their families who would be affected by the hurricane.

In a nationwide broadcast message, Commissioner Michael Astrue stated:

"Hurricane Alex is a good reason for all of us, no matter where we live, to promote Direct Deposit in our communities. When natural disasters disrupt mail service or force evacuations, Direct Deposit ensures benefit payments are delivered on time and that the money is accessible from anywhere..."

Employees in the Brownsville office were eventually allowed to go home around 10 a.m. on Wednesday, but they were told to return to work on Thursday unless they heard otherwise.

"What happens if their home phone numbers don't work, there's no cell service, or there's no electrical power?" asked Dana Duggins, the Third Vice President of Council 220. "The employees are supposed to go to work, even at the risk of their own lives? Or leave their children alone just to produce a few more work units?"

She also noted that during recent contract talks, SSA management rejected the Union's proposals to include leave provisions for such emergency situations, saying the agency has "learned its lesson" from past catastrophes.

"It happened during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and with Hurricanes Ike and Gustav during 2008," Duggins said, "and it's obvious that SSA never learned a thing from those disasters. This will be a long hurricane season."

AFGE SSA GENERAL COMMITTEE, AFL-CIO

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