

DAWN

**“I have a medical card,
but what good is it if I can’t use it.”**

Dawn, mid-50s, living with multiple health problems in a hotel in Baton Rouge, interviewed January 17, 2006

“They were happy times.” Dawn is an African American woman in her mid-fifties. Prior to the hurricane, she lived by herself in the Uptown area of New Orleans in a rental home. She has fond recollections of life before the storm, and said, “I remember sitting on the porch and seeing all my friends. I was very sociable. I know everybody and I had good friends in New Orleans.” Outside of her friends, Dawn was basically on her own. She has three grown children but was not living with them. Dawn felt like she was doing quite well for herself in New Orleans. She worked part-time on the line at a shrimp factory that she had worked at off and on for years and had no trouble getting around the city. As she said, “It was easy. Everything was within walking distance, and buses run every ten or fifteen minutes.”

While Dawn viewed much of her life before the storm positively, she was dealing with a number of health issues, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and bipolar disorder. She had a primary care doctor that she had seen for years. He had recently retired and she had begun seeing a new doctor. She was quite pleased with both and said, “They are both very good doctors.” She visited her doctors in a primary care clinic outside of Tulane Hospital. She said she was able to get preventive care including mammograms and other screenings and had no difficulty getting the five prescription drugs she was

taking. As she described, “All I had to do was call the doctor and leave a message at the desk and say that I was out of my medication, and they’d fill the prescriptions. I’d pick them up, or they’d send them to my house. It was very easy.”

Dawn has been on Medicaid since the early 1990s. She qualifies as disabled due to her bipolar disorder and began receiving Medicaid when she applied for Social Security. She said, “It’s been a blessing, yes, it’s been all right.” Because of her Medicaid coverage, Dawn did not have any trouble affording her health care in New Orleans. Dawn noted, “I have Medicaid, so they basically take care of the bulk.”

“I had the clothes on my back period and that was it.” When the hurricane hit, Dawn stayed in the city and waited it out at a neighbor’s house. After the storm, she hitchhiked out of the city directly to Baton Rouge. She had almost nothing with her except her identification, medical card, the medications she took during the day, and a few changes of clothes. Dawn went straight to a hotel in Baton Rouge where she has lived in since the storm. She has been alone since the storm and unable to connect with her family. She said, “I can’t find anyone. I haven’t talked to any of my kids or my grandchildren, and my son’s even here ... and I can’t find him.”

The hurricane has taken an emotional toll on Dawn. She feels abandoned and said, “We’ve been left without anything. I know the good Lord is here for us, but it’s like we’ve been left here and nobody cares and it hurts. It really hurts.” She reported having frequent crying spells and said, “... even though I have a problem anyway with depression and things, I’ve never cried as much.” She also described problems sleeping and eating, noting, “I’ll sleep for about 20 minutes and then wake up and stay up for some hours, but my sleeping is very, very bad. My eating has gone completely berserk. All the foods I liked before, I don’t like anymore.”

“I have a medical card, but what good is it if I can’t use it.” Even though Dawn has continued to be covered by Medicaid since the storm, she has been unable to receive needed health care, and she is frustrated and concerned. The major challenge facing Dawn appeared to be finding a doctor that would see her and that she could reach. Her only mode of transportation in Baton Rouge is her bicycle, as taxis are too expensive. She said, “I’m the only health care I have. It’s either too late and it’s hard for me to go, even on a bicycle, because some days I don’t feel good.” Given these challenges, Dawn has relied on the emergency room for care. However, as she described, “My shortest wait was eight hours, unless I ride my bike to Our Lady of the Lake, which is a bit too far from the hotel.” Dawn has been unable to see any specialists and noted, “Specialists are what you call the impossible. It’s something you don’t get.”

“... My level of depression and anxiety and things of that nature are a lot worse because I don’t have the medication.” Given her problems obtaining care, Dawn’s physical condition has deteriorated since the storm. Her biggest health problems stem from her

disconnection with her prescription drugs. Prior to the hurricane, she was taking five prescription drugs, including one for her depression. Since the hurricane, the only medication she has been able to obtain is her high blood pressure medication. As she described, “I rode my bicycle to Baton Rouge General and went to emergency and that’s the only one they would give me ... they give me sixty pills, and what I’m supposed to be doing is taking two a day and instead what I’ve been doing is taking one a day ... so the medication will stretch out over a longer period of time.” She also noted that her high blood pressure had become worse since the hurricane due to problems accessing healthy food while living in a hotel. She said, “I try to eat everything I’m supposed to, which I can’t do living in a hotel, it’s impossible ... it’s basically impossible to eat a good healthy meal.”

“Now that I’m living in a hotel, they’ve cut me off of food stamps completely, except for twenty-nine dollars.” Dawn is looking forward to the future with some excitement because the church recently helped her find a house in Baton Rouge to which she will be moving. However, she has financial concerns, noting that much of her food stamp money has been eliminated because of the added money she received through FEMA assistance and that she is unable to work because she is separated from her medications. She is currently relying on her Social Security and FEMA assistance. However, she hoped to get herself settled and reconnected with care. She noted, “I’m just going to have to wait until I get my house straightened and until I’m completely moved in and when I can eat better. I’ll get myself to the Labor Board and start working a side job to pay for a doctor.” On returning to New Orleans, Dawn commented, “I would like to, but I don’t think I’ll ever go back.”