

GERTRUDE

**“I miss my children, my mom,
... my sister,
... my brother
... I miss my people.”**

Gertrude, 39 years old, developmentally disabled woman living in a hotel in Baton Rouge, interviewed January 17, 2006

“All my family and friends was down there.” Gertrude is a 39 year-old African American woman who suffers from multiple chronic physical conditions as well as a mental disability. Prior to the Hurricane, she lived with her boyfriend in an apartment in Kenner, an area right outside New Orleans. She lived near her mother, who was caring for four of Gertrude’s six children; the other two children are older and were living on their own. Her mother has cared for Gertrude’s children since they were born given Gertrude’s disability.

Although she did not live in the same residence as her mother and children, Gertrude noted, “that was like every day that we seen each other.” As she described, “I just go catch a bus by her house to go see her. Or she come in her car to come see me.” Gertrude said, “I loved it in New Orleans;” being surrounded by family and friends made her happy.

Gertrude qualifies for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) due to her disability. She had been living independently, but her mother served as her guardian and was the recipient of her SSI checks. In addition to her disability, Gertrude suffers from diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. She was taking a total of four prescription drugs for her mental and physical conditions. Gertrude did not have a regular doctor in New Orleans but would go to clinics or the emergency room when she needed care. She also saw a psychiatrist who maintained her psychiatric medication.

Gertrude has been covered by Medicaid since she was a child through her disability. Although Medicaid kept her drug costs low, she still sometimes had difficulty affording them. As she described, “they tell me I have to pay \$1.50 or fifty cents, sometimes I didn’t have the money to buy. It would take two or three days until I get my welfare check or until I get my SSI check to get it.”

“It was sad because that was the last time I seen my mama.” Gertrude evacuated to Baton Rouge the day before the storm in a car with her boyfriend and her boyfriend’s mother. Her mother evacuated to Texas with Gertrude’s children. As Gertrude described, “it took me about two months to get in touch with them.” She said, “I was scared because I thought my mom and them wasn’t all right.”

Gertrude has not seen her mother and children since the storm, but she speaks with them on the phone. She noted, “I be calling every month. It’s long distance and that’s the only time I can talk to them, one time a month.” The separation from her family has been traumatic. She said, “I miss them. I miss my children, my mom, ... my sister, ... my brother ... I miss my people,” and noted, “every time I talk about them I always start crying ... I always cry.”

When Gertrude and her boyfriend first arrived in Baton Rouge, they stayed with her boyfriend’s family in a

house. The house was crowded and Gertrude said, "... they didn't have enough room, we had to sleep on the floor." She eventually left the house and moved into a hotel.

"I been down here four months and I ain't been taking my medicine." Gertrude had very little with her when she left New Orleans. She said, "they had told us to hurry up and pack up our stuff and go ... I left my medicine and all that." Gertrude did not have any of her medications with her and has been unable to obtain any since the storm. As she described, "I went to the doctor and ... when they asked me the name of my medicine I didn't know ... So the doctor couldn't give me nothing." Another challenge Gertrude faces in obtaining care is transportation. She said, "... if I had a car I would have been went to the right doctor to get me medicine."

When Gertrude feels sick, she uses the diabetic testing machine of her boyfriend's grandmother. She said, "When I test it, it be like really low, but she give me peppermint food. I need the medicine because I started having a problem at the bottom of my leg." Gertrude is also going without her asthma inhaler and her high blood pressure medication, as well as medication for her mental disability. She said, "I'm not taking nothing for my nerves because I shake a lot, then I rock. I like to rock a lot and I'm kind of paranoid because sometimes I hear voices and stuff. That's what my medicine was for."

Gertrude is concerned about her health. She said, "I don't know what might ... happen to me if I don't take that medicine ... I don't want to lose none of my legs because that's what they say, that you go in a coma, and I don't want none of that to happen to me."

"I didn't have no money to get nothing to eat." It seemed that Gertrude had not yet received any financial assistance from FEMA. She said, "We are still waiting for the money from FEMA. We about to get our trailer soon but we ain't got the money right now to turn on the lights and water." Gertrude has been struggling financially. She said one of her biggest challenges is "trying to get something to eat. They stopped serving food at the hotel. They stopped giving us emergency food stamps." She noted, "I didn't have no money to get nothing to eat so I use to have to borrow money from people at the hotel just to get something to eat until I get the money from FEMA."

"I don't know how the future going to turn out." Gertrude remains very uncertain her future and the biggest issue on her mind is whether she will be able to see her mother and children again. She said, "I don't know how the future going to turn out, if I'm going to see them again. I hope I do. I miss them ... I don't remember their faces no more. It seem like a long time."