

**“The doctor said I should have been out
of my pressure pills long ago.
I told her I stretched them.”**

Mack, 72 years old, single man living alone in a rented room in New Orleans,
interviewed January 30, 2006

“I lost everything.” Mack is a soft-spoken, 72 year-old African American man with a slight build and an easy laugh. Mack’s dedication to his job and his church defined his pre-Katrina life. Before the levees were breached, he lived alone in a home he rented in Uptown New Orleans. His “very, very small family” includes two sisters, and neither lived near him in New Orleans. Not owning a car, he commuted through a maze of bus transfers each day to a suburban mall where he worked as a maintenance man seven days each week. When not at work, he could usually be found volunteering at his local church where he was a deacon.

“Before Katrina I was getting a check up every couple months.” Mack was in fairly good health before Katrina. Still working at 72 years old, his job required him to stay physically active. He explained, “Every job I’ve had has made me walk, walk, walk. I think that’s got something to do with it.” Despite his level of activity, Mack does have hypertension. He said, “One thing is I have high blood pressure. The doctor told me as long as I stay skinny like this I’m okay.” Mack’s only prescription medication is “pressure pills” to control swelling associated with his hypertension. In addition, Mack had major surgery several years ago at Tulane Hospital to remove blood clots in his legs, but he fully recovered.

Mack received his health care through the Charity Hospital system. Enrolled in both Medicare and

Medicaid, Mack could have received care from a wide variety of providers in the New Orleans area, but he chose a Charity clinic where he saw the same physician regularly and which he could reach easily by bus.

“You’re a member of our family now.” Mack’s long evacuation saga began at his home, where he rode out the storm itself. He fled his home in waist-deep water to seek shelter in a church with nothing more than a change of clothes, his wallet, some Ritz crackers, and his “pressure pills.” As a deacon, he was entrusted with a key, which he felt he may have used inappropriately to unlock the deserted church and wait out the flood on a higher level with no food and little drinkable water. After three days, a member of the congregation rescued him in a boat and said, “you’re a member of our family now.” With this church member’s family, Mack proceeded to an overpass out of the flood waters, where he was picked up by a preacher’s bus on its way to Little Rock, Arkansas. After some time, he headed to Fort Worth, Texas in a military SUV and from there to Baton Rouge where his sister lives. Finally, he returned to the New Orleans area to live alone in an apartment in Algiers.

Katrina destroyed Mack’s home and all his possessions, including a collection of maps and pictures assembled over a lifetime. “The pictures and maps ... I had hundreds. I lost all that. It was in that water. I lost everything.” Although he has no children of his own,

Mack was “like a father” to a young man in his neighborhood who was evacuated to Tennessee and has no plans to return. “Now he’s just gone. He’s in Tennessee. That’s what bothers me, people and friends.”

“I might doze off, but the rest of the night I was up all night. I never told anybody about it.” Mack has not discussed the emotional trauma he has suffered since the storm with anyone and was hesitant to do so during the interview. He has had difficulty sleeping since the storm, and feels he is suffering from “stress.” Admitting his mental health has declined since Katrina, Mack said, “As far as mentally, I don’t think I’m 100 percent like I was before the storm.” However, he said he would be reluctant to see a mental health provider for treatment.

“The doctor said I should have been out of pressure pills long ago. I told her I stretched them.” Though his health remained relatively good after Katrina, Mack lost the network of caregivers he routinely accessed in New Orleans. The Charity clinic where he used to get treatment was destroyed, and he has no way to contact his physician. At the time of the interview, he had only one brief visit with a physician while in a shelter in Arkansas, who advised him to find a new supply of hypertension medication but was not able to provide any. Mack had not found a new primary care physician, and had no idea where he would turn when he needed a new prescription or should he fall ill.

Mack was forced to “stretch” his medication by taking less than the recommended dosage. “By me knowing I’m not going to be able to get them, I just took one every now and then.” Although he left with his entire supply of medication when evacuating, he quickly found himself without an adequate supply. Once back in the New Orleans area, Mack struggled to find a pharmacy that was open and that would fill his prescription. In sorting through the wreckage of his

flooded home, he found a water-logged prescription that he was able to fill at a national chain. At the time of the interview in January, Mack had received a card at his current address for prescription drug coverage through the new Medicare Part D benefit. Previously, he could get a month’s supply for \$3 at Charity, but his copayment rose to \$10 when he filled his prescription after Katrina at the national chain.

“It takes me an hour and a half to get to work, but it takes me three and a half hours to get home. Trust me, it affects you.” Mack was able to resume his job working in maintenance at a suburban mall by December. Prior to Katrina, he rode city buses an hour each way to reach the mall where he worked seven days a week. Now that he lives in Algiers on the opposite side of the Mississippi River, Mack must take a ferry and several additional buses that run far less frequently and reliably than before Katrina. Other jobs were available in the tight post-Katrina New Orleans labor market, but none were accessible because of inadequate public transportation. “I turned two good jobs down because of transportation,” Mack said.

“It’s going to be a long time for New Orleans to come back.” Mack received some aid from FEMA but declined cash assistance because he believed it required granting FEMA access to his savings account. His distrust of FEMA prevented him from receiving financial assistance. He also preferred to find his own apartment—“They wanted me to get a trailer. I don’t want a trailer.” Mack’s independence and work ethic allowed him to reestablish a residence in the New Orleans area and return to his job despite his incredibly long commute. Mack is committed to returning to his old neighborhood and church if possible, though he recognized that the road to recovery will be a long one and that his life and city are likely changed forever: “I don’t think things will be done. Not in my lifetime ... It will never be back to what it was before.”