



BROOKINGS GREATER WASHINGTON RESEARCH PROGRAM
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Calling 211: Enhancing the Washington Region's Safety Net After 9/11

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Philanthropic, social service, and unemployment agencies in the Washington metropolitan area made exceptional efforts to meet the needs of dislocated hospitality-industry workers after September 11th, and in doing so alleviated much hardship among laid-off employees. However, many dislocated hotel workers still struggled to connect with services. This difficulty in accessing housing, food, and other assistance highlights the need for a more seamless and accessible social-services system. One year after the disaster, the region now has an opportunity to make real and significant improvements in its information and referral network by instituting a 211 system for connecting residents to health and human services.

Introduction

The effects of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 reverberated throughout the nation. In addition to the loss of life at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash site in Pennsylvania, the economic consequences quickly rippled throughout the country, compounding the effects of an already slowing national economy.

In the Washington region, the travel and tourism industries were particularly affected. News reports documented that thousands of workers—cabdrivers, restaurant workers, hotel workers, tour guides, airport employees—were idled by the drop in travel and the extended closure of Reagan Washington National Airport.

This study examines the impact of the September 11th attacks on one segment of the hospitality industry—hotel employees—with a particular focus on low-income employees. The study's goal is to provide information on the social and economic impacts of the attacks on vulnerable populations in the Washington region, as well as to better inform local policymakers, service providers, and funders as they continue to respond to human services needs in the region.

The report documents that throughout the region, philanthropic donors, nonprofit service providers, and government agencies—particularly unemployment agencies—mobilized quickly to meet the surge in social service needs from dislocated workers. In a short time frame, they raised additional funds and expanded their service programs to meet the dramatic upsurge in demand, and in doing so alleviated serious hardship for thousands of residents. Yet, dislocated workers still found it difficult to connect with resources, due to a social-services infrastructure

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that does not support a simple and efficient method for people to learn about and access available services and for agencies to coordinate their activities. Additionally, although unemployment insurance and emergency assistance provided a critical safety net, many workers are still struggling to recover financially after long periods of layoffs or reduced hours, and remain unsure of whether they can meet their basic expenses on a month-to-month basis. Demand for assistance remains greater than the supply.

Methodology

Although hotel employees were not the only ones who experienced layoffs and economic hardships in the wake of the attacks, we focused on them since news reports and anecdotal evidence suggested they were among the hardest hit. Additionally, we anticipated that information on hotel employees would be more readily available than for other occupations, either from large employers or intermediary organizations such as the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union and the Hotel Association of Washington, D.C.

There are two major components to the study: 1) focus-group interviews of a total of 70 hotel employees who were laid off or had their work hours reduced, from which the bulk of the report is drawn; and 2) information on the residential location of 1,006 workers who came to the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 25 for assistance. Local 25 provided home-address information of union members who registered with the union for assistance in the aftermath of September 11th. The geographic information of each worker was then geocoded and mapped using the ArcView system in order to determine if certain neighborhoods or areas were more affected than others.

The focus groups examined how the downturn in the hospitality industry affected hotel workers, where they went for assistance, and whether that assistance was adequate. Seven focus groups took place between May 31, 2002 and July 3, 2002. Participants received a \$20 stipend and were recruited through the following organizations: Adventist Community Services; Boat People SOS; Ethiopian Community Development Center; Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 25; the Spanish Catholic Center; Salvation Army; and Shirlington Employment and Education Center. Participants were overwhelmingly immigrants, with 79 percent born in another country. Nineteen percent were born in the United States, and another 2 percent did not say. Of those born in this country who listed their race/ethnicity, one was white and the remainder were African American. The racial and ethnic breakdown of the participants was as follows: 36 percent Latino, 20 percent of African descent (foreign-born), 14 percent African-American, 13 percent Asian, 3 percent white, and 14 percent unknown. Sixty-five percent of the participants were female, and 35 percent were male. The average age was 44 years old. Average length of employment with a hotel was seven years. More than a third of participants were housekeepers. Almost 15 percent were waiters or servers, whether for banquets or in hotel restaurants, and another 11 percent were involved in food preparation and service. Other occupations included laundry workers, seamstresses, porters, gardeners, and front-desk clerks.

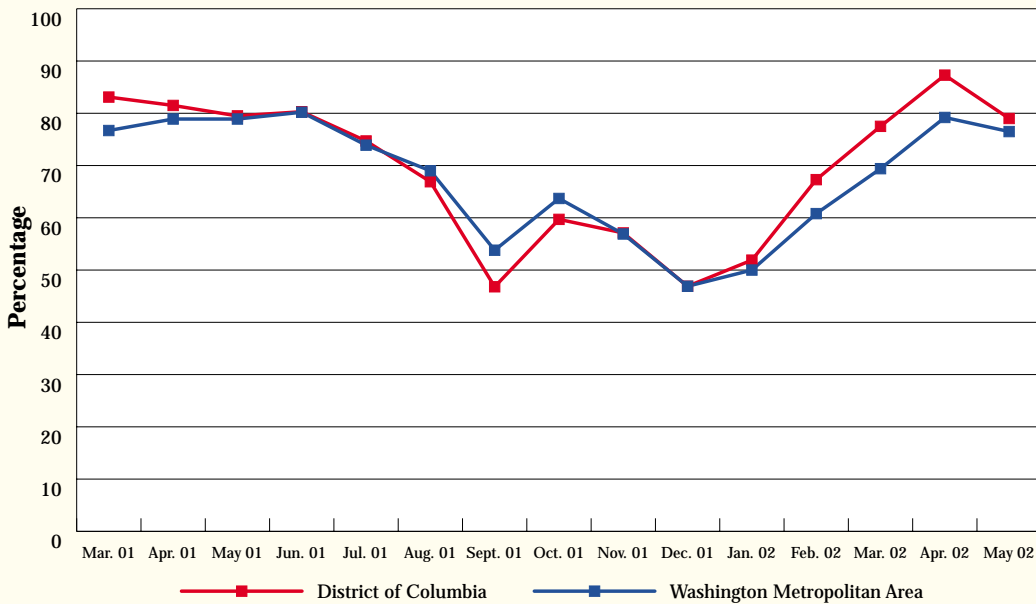
One additional note about the focus groups: Since these sessions supplied mostly anecdotal and first-person observations, their results could not be quantified and instead are summarized qualitatively in this report to convey a sense of the overall experience of workers in the weeks and months after displacement.

Findings

Hotel Workers Experienced Massive Dislocation in the Aftermath of September 11

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the hospitality industry in the region was crippled. In the month of September 2001, hotel occupancy in the District fell to under 50 percent, down by over 40 percent from September 2000 (see figure). In the metropolitan area, occupancy fell to just above 50 percent, a drop of 30 percent from the previous year. Occupancy remained low for the remainder of the fall, down by 15 to 25 percent from the previous year. Correspondingly, the revenue per available room—a key indicator of hotels’ financial status—also fell dramatically.¹ Until spring 2002, hotel revenues remained down or flat.

**Hotel Occupancy in Washington, D.C. and the Metropolitan Area
March 2001–May 2002**



Source: Smith Travel Research and the Washington, D.C. Convention and Tourism Corporation

While no exact figures exist regarding the number of hotel employees who were laid off, the estimates provided by industry sources point to a massive dislocation immediately after the attacks. Under “normal” circumstances, according to 2000 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 16,000 people are employed by hotels in the District of Columbia, almost 5,000 in Arlington County, and almost 1,800 in the city of Alexandria.² In the month following September 11, the Hotel Association of Washington, D.C. estimated that about 60 percent of the workers employed by its member hotels were laid off. Of those remaining on the

job, many had their hours cut drastically. Another figure comes from Local 25, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees union, which estimates that 4,000 of its 5,000 hotel employee members in the region were laid off. Employment has steadily climbed back up from these lowest levels—in the summer of 2002, the Hotel Association estimated that 85 percent of all District hotel employees who had been laid off were back on the job. However, not all of them are back up to full-time work weeks, and instead remain on reduced schedules.

Low- and Moderate-Income Workers Were Disproportionately Affected

Information from District hotels indicates that the majority of hotel employees laid off were line-workers, or non-management employees, which is not surprising given that an estimated 70 percent of the total hotel workforce is non-management. Many of these employees are at the lower end of the income scale, and although they may have another job or a second earner in the household to boost their income, they may not have the personal or family resources to allow them to cope with a sudden and unexpected job loss. For example, assuming full-time work, housekeepers in the District earned about \$23,000 per year in 2000; in Maryland, about \$18,000 per year, and in Virginia, about \$15,000 per year.³ However, even higher-income employees such as banquet servers, who can earn upwards of \$60,000, may not have the savings to sustain them through months of reduced work hours.

Average Yearly Income, 2000 (assuming full-time status)

	District of Columbia	Maryland	Virginia
Average across all industries, occupations ^(a)	\$53,018	\$36,373	\$35,151
Housekeeper	\$22,910	\$17,840	\$14,790
Switchboard operator	\$24,680	\$21,460	\$19,610
Baggage Porters	\$22,510	\$20,730	\$25,660
Front Desk Clerk	\$22,280	\$17,580	\$15,900

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

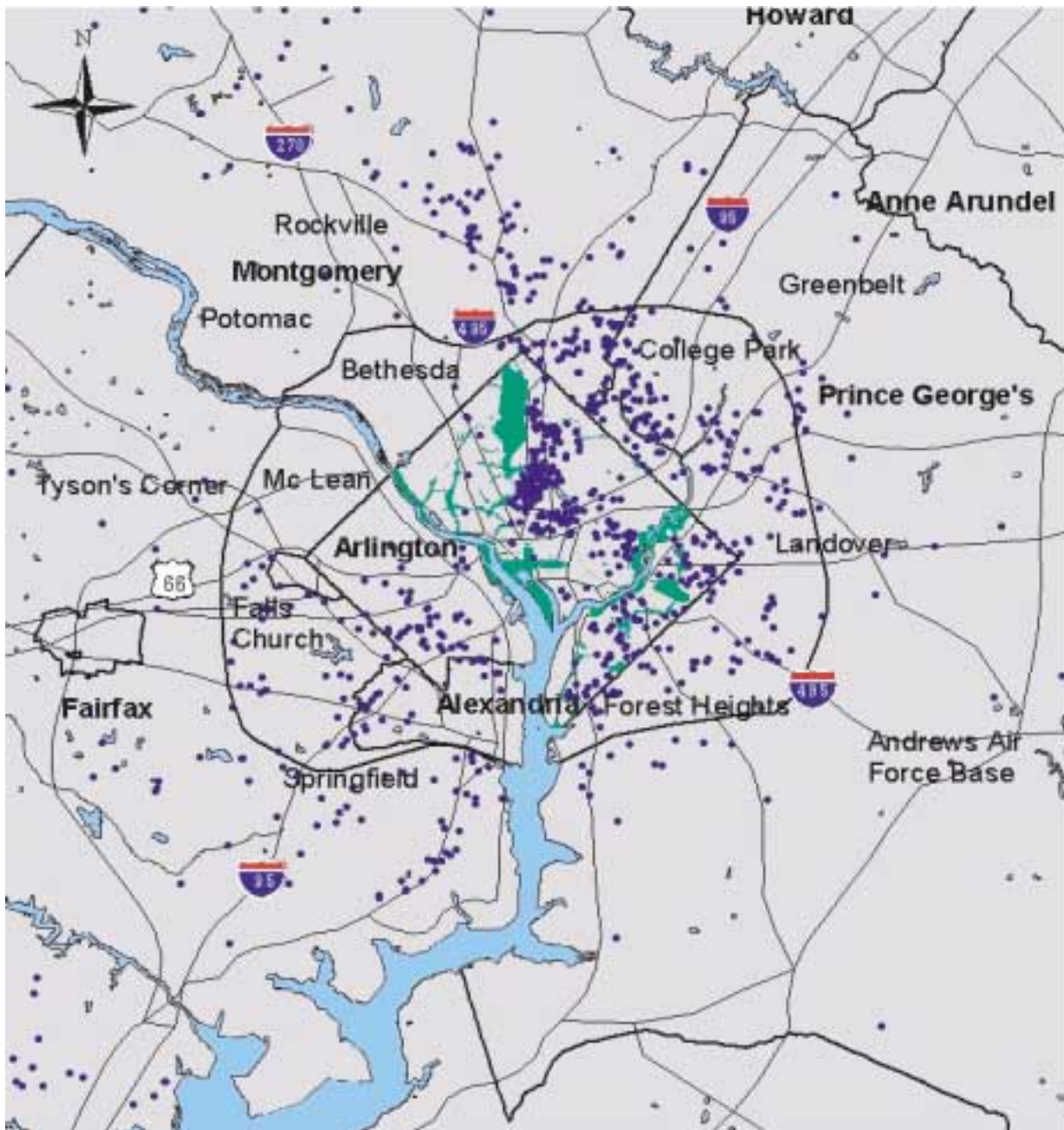
(a) preliminary figures

Affected Workers Live Throughout the Region

Residency data from hotel workers who registered with the union for assistance highlight the surprisingly wide geographical reach of worker dislocation. To be sure, most members of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 25—about 5,000 out of 8,000 total members—work in hotels within the Washington metropolitan area. And most work in District hotels. However, analysis of the geographic data provided by Local 25 reveals a more dispersed impact of September 11th.

While nearly all of the union’s members who registered for aid worked in District hotels, they primarily lived in suburban Maryland and Virginia (see map). Out of 1,006 workers, approximately 43 percent reside in Maryland, 35 percent in the District, and 22 percent in Virginia.⁴ The majority (75 percent) lives within the Beltway. They are concentrated in a number of immigrant neighborhoods, such as South Arlington, Mt. Pleasant, and Langley Park, as well as areas not characterized by high immigrant populations, such as Southeast DC and parts of inner Prince George’s County. They reside in 16 different jurisdictions, although the vast majority (97 percent) lives in the following 5 jurisdictions: the District (34.5 percent), Prince George’s

Greater Washington Region Residences of Union Hotel Workers Affected by September 11th



- Residence of union hotel workers who registered with Local 25 for assistance due to lay-offs and reduced hours

County (25.6 percent), Montgomery County (17.3 percent), Fairfax County (11.1 percent), and Arlington County (5.2 percent). Within the District, almost a third live in the neighborhood clusters encompassing Mt. Pleasant, Columbia Heights, and Petworth in Northwest. Other neighborhoods with concentrations of affected union workers include Logan Circle/Shaw in Northwest, (7 percent of all union workers who registered for assistance), Ivy City/Trinidad in Northeast (5 percent), and Congress Heights/Bellevue in Southeast (6 percent).

Workers Who Were Laid Off or Had Their Hours Cut Struggled to Meet Basic Needs

Most hotel employees spoke in the focus groups of finding themselves in dire financial straits upon being laid off or having their hours cut in the weeks after September 11.⁵ Hotel workers reported being idled anywhere between one month to four months. Many workers who had been called back to work continued to work reduced hours with a correspondingly reduced income.

Consequently, focus-group participants recounted a wide range of economic difficulties. Many spoke of having depleted their savings, or run behind in their bills. They also reported difficulty with rent/mortgage payments, food, utilities, car payments, tuition for their children, prescriptions, co-payments for medical appointments, and remittances to family abroad.

Especially acute was the problem of meeting housing costs. The focus groups also highlighted the problems associated with the loss of health insurance due to losing a job.

Overall, hotel employees coped—and are still coping—by adjusting their spending patterns, tapping their savings, renting rooms in their homes, turning to family and friends for assistance, amassing credit card debt, and receiving unemployment insurance and emergency assistance from social service agencies.

Housing Costs Were the Most Difficult to Meet

A high proportion of households in the region with incomes less than \$41,000 already faced housing-affordability problems prior to September 11, with high numbers of such renters and homeowners devoting more than 30 percent of their income to housing.⁶ The terrorist attacks only exacerbated this crisis. Although the hotel employees who were laid off or had their hours reduced may have had a second job or a second earner in the household to boost their earnings, the income of many hotel occupations, as noted above, nonetheless place them squarely in the category of those facing housing affordability problems.

Almost every participant in the focus groups reported difficulty with making rent or mortgage payments after September 11th.

Even after reducing other spending, participants still reported continuing uncertainty about their ability to pay for housing. Although most participants did not lose their homes or apartments, one woman was evicted along with her children, and another reported renting out rooms in her home to cover her family's costs. Emergency assistance from a number of social service organizations proved critical in ensuring that more people did not lose their housing. However, that assistance was generally limited to one or two months of expenses, and many participants reported continuing difficulty in paying the rent or mortgage each month, given their depleted savings and reduced work hours. Some participants have faced rent and utility increases as well, increasing their housing cost burden.

Another indication of distress: The number of housing-related disputes handled by Local 25's legal services department increased eight-fold following September 11th. Between September and December 2000, the legal department handled fewer than 100 housing-related disputes between renters and landlords or owners and mortgage companies. During the same time period in 2001, the number of housing cases ballooned to more than 800.

“Almost every participant in the focus groups reported difficulty in making rent or mortgage payments after September 11th.”

Many Workers Lost Health Insurance

September 11th also exacerbated the health-insurance problems of lower-income workers. Many hotel workers lacked insurance before their jobs were disrupted, but many others lost it when they were laid off or retained at reduced schedules that placed their weekly work hours below the necessary threshold for health benefits. In fact, some participants in the focus groups reported that after September 11th people lost their coverage immediately upon being laid off, rather than retaining benefits for a period of time after termination, as had been had done previously. In addition, a number of workers lost their dental and optical insurance arranged through the union.

The effects of losing health coverage have been considerable for many families. One focus-group participant with a previous back injury could no longer receive treatment, as she had not been recalled to work and so remained without insurance. Another was trying to recover the costs associated with a work-related injury, for which she was no longer covered since she was laid off. In efforts to reduce spending and stretch dollars, households have cut back on health care expenditures. Some are simply not going to the doctor because they cannot afford it. In one focus group, people said they buy over-the-counter painkillers rather than visit the doctor. Others have enrolled with the DC HealthCare Alliance, the District's program for uninsured residents.

Even for those who retained coverage, affordability is an issue. Some participants reported increases in their monthly premiums since September. A number of people struggled to pay for prescriptions and co-payments for doctor visits. One woman opted out of her health plan due to the high premiums, and chose to go to a nonprofit medical clinic instead.

Workers Cut Food Costs to Make Ends Meet

A number of focus-group participants reported they have experienced, and continue to experience, food hardship. Food was one of the most commonly cited expenses cut when people struggled to meet housing and health coverage costs. Many have reduced the amount of food they buy, thereby reducing the amount they and their families eat. People also changed the type of food they purchased—a number mentioned cutting meat from their diets and buying more inexpensive food.

The emergency assistance provided by the union and other nonprofits played a critical role in helping people put food on the table at home. This assistance was usually only short-term, however. Many focus-group participants were still having difficulty providing sufficient food for their families.

Hotel Workers Are Still Struggling

Although the majority of hotel employees have returned to work, many focus-group participants remained in a precarious financial situation with reduced schedules and depleted savings. The hospitality industry is cyclical in nature, and workers are accustomed to saving money in the strong seasons to tide them over the slower seasons, when they may be furloughed or have their hours cut. Typically, the months of September through November are a strong season. However, the fall of 2001 was obviously an exception, so that the customary industry cycle was disrupted.

To cope with the disruption, employees depleted their savings (if they had any), used any paid time-off they had accrued, depended on the emergency assistance provided by unions and social service agencies, and, in many cases, ran behind in their bills, leading to late fees and marks against their credit.

Many focus-group participants expressed concern about future slow seasons (whether anticipated or unexpected), since they have already depleted their savings and are living paycheck-to-paycheck. Although many low-wage workers live paycheck-to-paycheck even in the absence of

a major disaster, for some participants this level of financial uncertainty was clearly a new phenomenon. They found themselves unable to plan for the future, for instance, to buy a house or save for retirement. Emergency assistance, while critical, generally only covered a month or two of expenses. While the assistance averted severe hardship for most, many workers still struggled to get by. With work below normal, and no overtime offered, some participants said they do not feel as though they can fully recover.

Non-Profits, Grantmakers and Government Agencies Increased Their Commitment to the Safety Net, But Workers Still Struggled to Connect with Resources

Safety Net Providers Mobilized to Meet Increased Demand. . . .

Workers turned to a number of sources for support in the wake of the layoffs and work reductions, and providers responded.

Most focus-group participants filed for unemployment insurance, and most received it, although some did not because they did not meet the work history requirement, either being recent entrants to the labor force or having worked part-time.

The District of Columbia and Virginia both temporarily increased weekly benefit payments in response to the economic dislocation caused by the attacks of September 11th. In the District, maximum weekly payments rose from \$309 to \$359 for those who filed claims between September 9, 2001 and March 9, 2002. In Virginia, the maximum monthly benefit rose from \$268 to \$368 per week, effective until 2003. Both the Department of Employment Services in the District and the Virginia Employment Commission opened temporary offices to serve the large increase in people filing unemployment claims. Additionally, the federal economic stimulus package enacted in March 2002 included a temporary extension of unemployment benefits. Workers filing unemployment claims after March 2001 who exhaust their regular benefits (up to 26 weeks) and meet a “length of employment” requirement are eligible for up to an additional 13 weeks of benefits, paid for by federal dollars.

Relatively few focus-group participants reported applying for other public benefits such as Food Stamps and welfare, saying they hoped they would be back at work soon and citing the difficulty of filling out complicated forms, especially in the absence of translators for non-native English speakers. Others didn’t apply for public benefits because of misinformation or confusion about the programs: For instance, that Food Stamps are reserved only for families, not individuals, and that the government would deduct unemployment compensation payments from any future Social Security retirement benefits.

Hotel employees also sought emergency assistance from the nonprofit sector. Organizations providing assistance included the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 25 and another AFL-CIO affiliate, the Community Services Agency of the Metropolitan Washington Council, AFL-CIO. Other nonprofits providing assistance include the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, smaller community-based organizations such as the Spanish Catholic Center, Boat People SOS, and the Tenants and Workers Support Committee, and an array of individual churches. With the exception of Local 25, which served primarily in a referral capacity, these groups distributed funds to pay for expenses such as housing and utilities, and provided food or food coupons. Most organizations covered one or two months of expenses: If a client sought additional assistance, he or she was referred to another organization.

Local 25 and the AFL-CIO Community Services Agency both quickly mobilized to assist their members. Local 25’s offices became an impromptu community center. It directed members to the Community Services Agency for emergency assistance funds, organized food drives, acted as a source of information and referrals to other social service organizations, and advocated for its members with creditors such as utility and mortgage companies. The Community Services

Agency disbursed almost \$700,000 in the months following September 11 in emergency assistance to both union and non-union workers throughout the region.

Other organizations were equally active in providing emergency assistance to those affected economically by the attacks. The seven Salvation Army offices in the Washington metro area distributed more than \$7 million in emergency assistance to hotel workers, airport employees, taxi drivers, tour guides, and others, in addition to their direct relief efforts at the Pentagon crash site. Similarly, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington spent almost one million dollars on emergency assistance. The United Way of the National Capital Area awarded \$1.5 million in grants to nonprofit organizations throughout the region providing emergency assistance to secondary victims of the attacks.

While this is in no way a comprehensive reporting of the funds raised in support of those affected by September 11, it nonetheless illustrates the responsiveness of the nonprofit and philanthropic community in the face of disaster and its rippling economic consequences.

. . . Yet Workers Struggled with a Lack of Information and Agency Coordination, and Continue to Face Difficulty Making Ends Meet

The exceptional efforts of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, coupled with unemployment benefits, provided critical aid to hotel employees and others. In spite of this, however, focus-group participants reported difficulties in accessing assistance. Overall, in fact, the picture that emerged from the focus groups was of a fairly haphazard arrangement of agencies and systems providing assistance that was confusing and at times difficult to navigate.

One person, for instance, cobbled together assistance from five different organizations to cover one month's rent. Similarly, other focus-group participants spoke of the difficulty of working with a number of different agencies at different locations that were not coordinated with each other.

Likewise, information was a problem. Non-union workers did not benefit from Local 25's activities to inform its members about available assistance and referrals to social service organizations. Nevertheless, several union members voiced dissatisfaction even with the union's efforts, saying that its outreach and publicity regarding available services were haphazard, and resulted in a "first-come, first-served" system of assistance that did not prioritize services to those with the most urgent needs. When workers did receive information, it was not always current or accurate. Some participants reported going to an agency for emergency assistance only to be told the organization was out of funds, in which case they were given a referral.

Additionally, limited funds kept service providers from assisting everyone who demonstrated need. For example, some clients who had already received assistance for one or two months of expenses from a particular organization were eventually turned down and instead referred to other organizations. Alternatively, a client presenting a late notice regarding rent payment might not receive assistance in favor of another client with an eviction notice.

In the end, two sentiments were the most common. First, workers in the focus groups said a single source of information and referrals for emergency assistance, job placement assistance, or job training would have been extremely helpful. Second, they declared that the unemployment benefits and one or two months of emergency assistance that most had received—although critical in averting evictions, foreclosures, and other severe hardships for most people—had not been sufficient to meet their ongoing expenses in the context of layoffs, reductions in hours, and for many participants, low-wage jobs.

Immigrants Faced Added Challenges in Accessing Assistance

With immigrants comprising such a high proportion of the regional hotel workforce, it bears noting that foreign-born workers struggled with additional hardships in the months after September 11. Language barriers clearly compounded the difficulty that nearly everyone reported in finding out what resources and services were available. Meanwhile, the scarcity of bilingual staff and forms in other languages at both public and nonprofit agencies made it more difficult for those with limited English to apply for and receive assistance, and deterred some immigrants from even applying.

In addition to language problems, a number of people reported that they were treated differently due to their immigrant status. Although not all immigrants felt this way, some noted that they encountered a perception among service providers that immigrants were less entitled to benefits than the native-born. There was also confusion on the part of service providers regarding services and requirements for immigrants: One Vietnamese-born U.S. citizen was required to produce a green card to document her legal status, although as a citizen she neither needed nor had a green card.

Additionally, federal restrictions on Food Stamp eligibility for immigrants barred many from receiving benefits. With some exceptions, adult, able-bodied immigrants are ineligible for Food Stamps until they become a U.S. citizen or can demonstrate that they have worked for 40 quarters (10 years).⁷

In the face of all this, organizations serving particular immigrant groups played a vital role in addressing the needs of those communities, according to focus group participants. These groups translated forms, acted as interpreters, advocated for their members with other agencies, and provided material assistance to people whom otherwise might not have received assistance.

Back at Work, Employees Report Continued Insecurity

One year after September 11, the majority of District hotel employees are back to work, with the Hotel Association estimating that 85 percent of all District hotel employees who were laid off have been recalled. However, many workers expressed feelings of insecurity regarding their jobs, in addition to the continued financial anxiety described above.

Some employees called back to work reported a number of grievances, while others reported no changes in their job compared to pre-September 11, citing the seniority system and union rules as ensuring fair treatment. Those with grievances reported being assigned additional responsibilities without corresponding increases in pay or extra time to complete their new tasks. Some housekeepers said they were being asked to increase the number of rooms they clean per shift, sometimes by as much as fifty percent. Some participants noted that hotels appear to be employing fewer workers in order to recoup the losses caused by reduced occupancy and the discounts used to attract travelers.

Several participants reported poor treatment on the job since September 11—for instance, some were threatened with losing their jobs if they asked for more hours or if they did not clean something properly. Some employees said they do not complain because they fear they will be replaced. On the whole, union workers appear to have more job security than non-union workers.

Immigrant workers expressed particular feelings of vulnerability, and some felt employers took advantage of their difficulty communicating and unfamiliarity with the norms and laws of this country. These feelings of vulnerability seemed to exist prior to September 11th, and were then intensified and amplified.

Policy Recommendations

This review of the experiences of Washington-area hotel workers in the wake of September 11 sheds light on two different sorts of problems. Most immediately, the information presented here documents the serious financial blow that was visited on the region's hotel workers by the layoffs and sharp reductions in hours. These difficulties have clearly imposed significant hardship on a sizable group of the region's low-income workers. At the same time, the testimony of local hotel workers highlights broader problems that continue to face the region's entire population of low-income workers and their families. Most pressing among these are the chronic burdens on low-income workers of high housing costs and difficulties pertaining to health-insurance access, the vulnerability of immigrants, and the fragmented nature of the region's social services network.

The two sets of problems call for different solutions. The first underscores the need for increased emergency assistance. Many hotel workers, and no doubt workers in other hospitality-related occupations, are still trying to recover financially from long periods of layoffs or reduced hours, or are not yet back at work. To prevent evictions, foreclosures, and food hardship, many workers need more emergency assistance than the one or two months of expenses generally available to them. Although governments and the philanthropic sector have already mounted an impressive response—increasing unemployment benefits and raising large sums of money in a short amount of time—the demand for emergency assistance still eclipses the supply.

The second set of problems calls for longer-term solutions—most of which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, no shortage of options exists for addressing these issues (although, of course, political will and fiscal constraints also come into play). For instance, the Washington Area Housing Partnership has proposed the creation of a Regional Housing Trust Fund to increase the supply of affordable housing. Regarding health insurance, state and federal governments could subsidize COBRA premiums for laid-off workers to continue their health insurance, extend Medicaid coverage to unemployed workers who are ineligible or unable to obtain COBRA even with subsidies, or establish a temporary state Medicaid option to cover unemployed workers.

On the issue of improving information and access to social services in either emergencies or normal circumstances, however, the region has a window of opportunity to make real and significant improvements. In part that means the social-services community should consider emulating current efforts on the part of area governments, hospitals, and other parties to improve regional coordination in emergency response plans.

Local Jurisdictions Should Collaborate to Create a 211 System, a Regional Information and Referral Network

As noted previously, the current information and referral network in the region is disjointed, complex, and haphazard.⁸ Residents would clearly benefit therefore from a system providing a single access point into the region's social-services network as well as increased service coordination, both under normal circumstances as well as in a possible future emergency.

And in fact, it was exactly such a system for which the Federal Communications Commission laid the groundwork in 2000, when it directed that the “211” telephone number be reserved nationwide for information and referral to social and human services agencies, in response to a petition filed by a coalition of social-service and information-and-referral organizations. The 211 system opens the way to a user-friendly social-services network, by providing an easy-to-remember and universally available phone number that links individuals and families in need to the appropriate non-profit and government agencies.

“The testimony of local hotel workers highlights broader problems that continue to face the region’s entire population of low-income workers.”

If a regional 211 system had been in place last September 11, the number could have been featured on newscasts and in other media focused on crisis response and recovery. Indeed, the Connecticut 211 system (the first statewide system), was a widely used resource after September 11, linking victims' families with assistance and maintaining a database with September 11th-related services. In Atlanta, philanthropic leaders have used the 211 system to monitor and assess community needs—by tracking call volume and type of calls, they can identify emerging needs, and raise and direct additional funds to the appropriate service providers.

As it happens, moreover, federal funds will likely be available to support state and local 211 initiatives. Legislation recently reported out of the Senate Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee allocates \$940 million for upgrading state and local public health and bioterrorism preparedness and response capacity. If states include the 211 system in their preparedness and response plans, they can use these federal dollars for a 211 system

Now is therefore an opportune time for local jurisdictions to create a regional I & R network. Moreover, with the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia in various stages of planning 211 systems within their respective borders, it is especially important that the jurisdictions collaborate to create a coordinated and integrated system before the states and the District lock in separate and potentially incompatible technologies, financing mechanisms, and organizational structures.

In addition to ensuring that clients would find “no wrong door” into the social-services network, such a system—if designed properly—could alleviate much of the difficulty experienced by immigrants with language barriers. Immigrants could call 211, speak in their native tongue to multilingual staff, learn about available services, and receive a referral to an organization with the capacity to serve a person with limited English proficiency.

Obviously, creating a 211 system in the Washington area requires resolving a multitude of logistical, technological, and funding questions. The regional nonprofit and philanthropic community would need to make a serious commitment. However, the problems are not insurmountable. There are a number of models the region can look to for guidance, including systems that span state and county boundaries and have a variety of organizational structures. Most I & R systems have United Way involvement as the organization that maintains or funds the network, although some systems are maintained by groups other than local United Way chapters. The 211 system run by the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta is the acknowledged leader in providing seamless regional I & R, and was the first to institute a 211 telephone number. Other systems are also in place in the states of Connecticut and Hawaii, and regions such as Louisville, KY (including both Kentucky and Indiana in its service area); Charlotte, NC; and Houston and Dallas, TX. Technical assistance is available from the United Way of America and the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems.

Agencies Can Also Use Internet Technology to Improve Service Delivery

Another option for improving service coordination is to use web-enabled information technology to smooth the administrative process in providing services, and allow multiple agencies to use a common system for screening, eligibility determination, and record-keeping. The technology also allows agencies keep information private to protect client confidentiality. Such a system allows multiple agencies to work more efficiently together when providing different services to the same client, by allowing easy information sharing and referrals.

The United Way of the National Capital Area has purchased the rights for its member organizations to use this technology. However, the hard and resource-intensive work of introducing the technology and training agency staff across the region remains to be done. Ultimately, however, both clients and service providers would benefit from a more organized and coordinated system for accessing information, applying for assistance, and obtaining referrals.

Conclusion

Several major points emerge from this assessment of how dislocated hotel workers fared in the Washington, D.C. region following September 11. First, philanthropic givers, social-service organizations and government agencies—most notably unemployment agencies—responded quickly to the crisis and provided critical assistance to workers who were laid off or whose hours were cut. Second, workers seeking assistance nevertheless had to navigate an uncoordinated and often confusing array of social service providers. This confusion somewhat reduced the effectiveness of the region's emergency assistance network. At the same time, these glitches also underscore this paper's third major observation: that setting up a "211" system may be an important agenda item for the region's social-services community. In sum, improving the regional information and referral network by instituting a region-wide 211 telephone number and referral system in the Washington, D.C.-area could greatly improve the accessibility of services for residents in a future emergency as well as in ordinary times.



Endnotes

- 1 Revenue per available room is calculated by dividing overall room revenue by total room supply.
- 2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Covered Employment and Wages," 2000. Available at <http://www.bls.gov/cew/home.htm>
- 3 Ibid., and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, 2000. Available at <http://www.bls.gov/oes/>
- 4 Note that this is a limited subsample of all hotel workers in the region, made up of solely of union members who registered for assistance. Because employees of only two hotels in Northern Virginia and none in suburban Maryland are members of Local 25, the sample undercounts the employees of Northern Virginia hotels and does not include employees of suburban Maryland hotels who were negatively impacted by September 11.
- 5 The description of the hotel employees' experiences after being laid off, including financial difficulties and receiving various forms of financial assistance, are all drawn from the focus groups described in the methodology section.
- 6 Margery Austin Turner et. al., "Housing in the Nation's Capital." Washington, D.C.: The Fannie Mae Foundation and The Urban Institute, 2002.
- 7 The Food Stamp Reauthorization Act of 2002, part of the 2002 Farm Bill, restores eligibility to legal immigrants who have been in this country for five years, immigrants with disabilities, and to all legal immigrant children, regardless of date of entry to the U.S. These changes will go into effect later in 2002 and 2003.
- 8 In addition to the focus-group findings, this point is made more systematically in a preliminary manuscript analyzing regional information and referral systems conducted for the Community Capacity Fund by Patricia Atkins of the George Washington Institute of Public Policy. The authors are indebted to Professor Atkins for sharing her analysis and information on other regions' I&R systems.

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