

# Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

**March 31, 1990**

At 5:04 PM on October 17th, 1989, I had just walked into the Santa Clara County Chapter of the American Red Cross (ARC). I was there to teach a class in Earthquake Preparedness at 7:30 and had come early to check the slide projector. The chapter was essentially where I stayed for the next month. The first few days were spent frantically fielding phone calls. After that, I went to work trying to help coordinate the many resources that were flooding into the area faster than they could be distributed. The general public is not very familiar with what the various agencies are able to do in a disaster and many goods were sent to agencies that did not have the ability to store or use them. Fortunately there is an association of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) through which we were able to direct donations to where they were needed in a somewhat efficient way. Some of the many agencies most involved included the Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Mennonite Disaster Services, Salvation Army, CRWRC, Second Harvest Food Bank, St. Anthony's, C.U.R.E., etc.

Because Santa Clara County seemed to be the least affected in comparison to the surrounding counties (Santa Cruz, Monterey, Alameda, and San Francisco) we were assigned minimal staff and volunteers from National Red Cross, and many of those were pulled out after 3 weeks. Most of the trained local volunteers had already gone to either Puerto Rico or South Carolina to work with the relief effort for Hurricane Hugo.

It was determined in late November that there was still a need for a Red Cross Service Center in the Santa Cruz mountain summit area, I was asked to be the site manager for the operation at the Redwood Estates Fire Station. The water system was nowhere near repaired and there was concern for both sanitation and fire danger if mountain residents tried to cook for themselves. It was a place to get clean water, prepared food, first aid, and essential supplies. It was also a place to meet and share information. I stayed there through the end of the year (we served our last meal on Christmas Day).

As there was not much to do between meals, I would sit and help some of the older people (and some illiterate people) with their applications for government assistance. It was there that I got my first clue that all was not progressing exactly as it was presented by the media and the disaster relief agencies. While trying to help people figure out what had gone wrong with their application, I began to develop an understanding of the intricacies of "the system".

When the Redwood Estates center closed, I applied for a United Way grant to provide continuing advocacy for the earthquake victims for 3 more months. The original plan was to conduct outreach to the affected community, explain the programs of assistance available and help with the application process. However it became apparent that the primary need was that of providing advocacy for the client. As the length of time after the disaster increased, the types of problems experienced by the victims evolved far from the standard textbook cases.

I felt it was extremely important to get people with significant losses registered "into the system" as disaster victims before the deadline. Despite enormous outreach efforts by both the government and the Red Cross, there were many misconceptions circulating among the victims, which had caused them to delay application. Some of the more prevalent were:

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

1. The Red Cross only gives emergency food and shelter. (This was true immediately after the disaster because emergency needs had to be met first. People did not understand that there were "phases" of assistance.)
2. Disaster Assistance is only available to low income families.
3. Any one with earthquake insurance need not apply because they will be automatically turned down by FEMA and SBA. (This is true but it was not made clear to the victims that they should reapply for assistance after settling with their insurance company, to cover the deductible.)
4. All disaster assistance must be paid back.
5. FEMA ran out of money at the end of the year and there is no point in applying now.
6. The Red Cross will give you everything you are eligible for on the first visit and it is not appropriate to go back and apply for more.
7. People shouldn't apply for assistance unless they really need help because there are others worse off and it would be taking resources from them.

It takes a lot of brochures, PSA's, and posters to undo the work of one fool who tells everyone he talks to not to go to the DAC (Disaster Application Center) because it's just a lot of lines of paperwork with no money at the end.

It became apparent to me that the various disaster relief programs did not fit together as tightly (in service, goals, or timing) as the picture presented to the public. Even people who had applied immediately after the earthquake, developed increasing frustration and cash flow problems as the applications backed up. The issues in the second half of my United Way contract centered around cash flow problems, appeals, and finding alternate sources of "maintenance" emergency assistance which was not anticipated by the more conventional disaster assistance programs.

### **U.S. DISASTER RELIEF SYSTEM**

As I understood it, the "plan" among the major responding agencies for relief in a nationally declared disaster is as follows:

#### **AMERICAN RED CROSS (ARC):**

Funded by public donations (as against government legislation) the American Red Cross has the capability to be much more flexible and timely in response. Because it is federally mandated to respond whether or not there is a declaration of disaster by state or federal officials, there is no need to delay. The initial goal of the ARC is to meet immediate the physical needs of food, shelter, clothing, medical assistance, etc. Simultaneously, there is an initial damage assessment carried out. The ARC statistics are often the basis of a request for state or federal government disaster declaration. Although there is no fixed formula, often if more than 26 - 30 (presumably uninsured) homes are destroyed, the County may inform the

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

Governor that the disaster is beyond the capability of local response. The Governor may in turn request the President for a national disaster declaration.

### **FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY (FEMA):**

Several years ago, in an attempt to streamline the relief programs, a single application system was devised for combining registrations, making FEMA the gateway to the other grant programs. For this reason, FEMA is often thought of as the agency which administers all grants and loans, although it is only directly responsible for 2 programs.

1. Temp Housing is provided for up to 18 months if the dwelling has been rendered unlivable by the disaster, and the applicant can demonstrate that there is ongoing need due to the disaster.
2. The Mini-Repair program is an alternative to Temp Housing for owners whose dwelling could (in the opinion of the inspector) be rendered livable within 1 month at the cost of less than \$5,000.

*Note:* Only one of the above awards is given. Rent will not be paid by FEMA while the victim is waiting for the house to be made livable with a Mini-Repair grant.

### **STATE OF CALIFORNIA:**

1. The *Individual and Family Grant Program (IFGP)* with a limit of \$10,400 is to replace essential personal property and do essential repairs. (The amount is periodically adjusted for inflation.) While this program is funded 75% by the Federal Government and 25% by the State, it is fully administered by the state. Grants are not given until it has been determined that the applicant cannot afford to repay an SBA loan.
2. The *Calgrant* program was recently passed by the State Legislature and can grant up to \$10,000 in addition to the *IFG*, if the maximum *IFG* amount has been awarded and it has been determined (by the inspector) that there is additional uninsured essential need. Those cases are automatically referred by *IFG*.
3. Newly created after this disaster, the application for a *Caldap* loan can only be made after a final determination has been made by FEMA, *IFG*, *Calgrant*, and the SBA. *Caldap* can then supply a 3% interest deferred payment loan for California property owners who are deemed unable to meet payments by SBA. The accrued interest and principal will be due when the property is sold or the owner dies. *Caldap* is also available for rental income units). The stated maximum of \$30,000 is standardly being waived if there is a need.

### **SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (SBA):**

1. 4% or 8% interest loans for homeowners up to a maximum of \$100,000 for uninsured property replacement or repairs. This may be increased by up to 20% for mitigation measures to prevent future losses to real property (due to the same type of disaster).
2. 4% or 8% interest loans for owners or renters up to a maximum of \$20,000 for uninsured losses of personal property.

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

3. Larger disaster loans to businesses to repair or replace facilities, inventory, or equipment.

### **DISASTER UNEMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE (DUA):**

Unemployment insurance for victims who were self-employed (or otherwise ineligible for unemployment) and had their incomes disrupted by the disaster.

### **ARC ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE:**

It is not clear how this will interact with *Caldap*, but typically, after the maximum amount of all other aid has been received, the Red Cross will re-examine the most needy cases and has the ability to fund major repairs and even rebuild homes.

There is obviously some overlap in the parameters of the different agencies. For instance the ARC, FEMA, and IFGP can all pay for repairs and rent and to a large extent, it is only a matter of timing who pays and how much. There are pre-agreements among the agencies and intricate protocols on who is responsible for the overlapping areas. In previous disasters, the Red Cross (because of its ability to begin work immediately) has kept a record of the rents and other payments that would have been eligible for FEMA, and billed the government later. It was decided not to keep those records this time, both because of the volume of paperwork and the unprecedented amount of donations that were coming in to the Red Cross.

This "payment protocol" system is presumably meant to speed up service. But after Hurricane Hugo, the ARC was criticized for delaying the airlift of aid into Puerto Rico for 5 days until President Bush finally declared a national disaster, because only then could the government be billed for the transportation. Having worked in non profit finance for 15 years, I know how difficult it is to maintain fiscal responsibility while trying to meet urgent human needs and priorities must be constantly examined. Several other things made this "division of labor" confusing difficult for the applicants to grasp. During the first weeks after the earthquake, three to six separate inspectors came to most homes and people became increasingly confused and frustrated.

1. There was the ARC damage assessment team that was initially looking for only gross structural damage.
2. There was the ARC caseworker who had to do a home visit if the client was requesting furniture or appliance replacement.
3. There was the Army Corps of Engineers that was looking at land stability to assess the feasibility of future construction.
4. There was the County Assessor who would be looking for both illegal building (done without permits) and possible property tax adjustments.
5. There was the FEMA Inspector who made the decision on eligibility for either Temp Housing or Mini-Repairs and listed personal Property losses for IFGP purposes.

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

6. There was the SBA inspector who assessed the damage as well as property value for loan purposes. Several years ago, FEMA and *FG* also had separate inspectors but an agreement was reached where they would accept a common inspection. SBA refused to enter into the agreement (because they say they are looking for different things) and continues to send a special inspector.
7. Later, if the victim finds it necessary to apply for a *Caldap* loan, yet another inspection will be required. These are only the initial inspectors, because the legislation prohibits response to appeals without a re-inspection, even if it can be demonstrated that there were gross errors on the initial report.

FEMA automatically awarded a standard amount to those eligible for Temporary Housing, 2 months for renters and 3 months for owners at the declared market value (\$950/month for Santa Clara County). The initial batch of inspectors carried checks with them and made immediate awards. Those who were not lucky enough to be in the first group, were confused and frustrated by the fact that they had to wait up to 2 months after being told they were eligible for assistance.

As this initial Temp Housing money began to run out, people were told that they could apply for additional aid but had to prove that they had spent the first award on rent. It was then that victims found out that they were not supposed to have used any of ~~for~~ deposits, only rent. The ARC was able to supply rent and utility deposits. But if the victim had not applied to ARC within the first 60 days (thinking that ARC only supplied emergency food and shelter), they were not considered Red Cross clients, because the ARC application period had not been extended along with FEMA's.

Even if the applicant was approved for extended Temp Housing assistance, they would have to pay the rent first, then send the receipt in to FEMA and wait for reimbursement. And nothing was happening very quickly at this point. Cash flow became critical as most people, under normal circumstances, cannot afford to pay both rent and mortgage for an extended period of time. In addition, many had had a disruption in income and were also under a great deal of stress. Santa Cruz County had told some residents that they could not even apply for permits to rebuild for months and many were tempted just to walk away from their equity.

### **THE NEED FOR ADVOCACY**

As the initial awards of FEMA and ARC emergency aid ran out, referrals came to me from everywhere, including FEMA, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties, Legal Aid, churches, and of course, word of mouth. The application deadline for government assistance was extended twice and remained open until April 19th. New applications continued to come in at a rate of 50 to 100 a day at the end of March as people discovered the extent of the damage, the shortcomings of their insurance policies, and the true cost of rebuilding their lives.

The pervasive problems were huge application backlogs and the timing of aid disbursement. Even though victims were clearly desperate and had been recommended (or even approved) for grants and loans, the cash was no where in sight and creditors were not always sympathetic. The Red Cross could have continued to supply emergency aid, but as staffing rotated and those in charge were further from the disaster, there was a lot of disagreement on whether there was still an emergency after 3 months. There was a great deal of pressure to "close out the cases and finish the job". "The Guidelines" were often quoted, but

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

the guidelines did not make allowances for the fact that Hurricane Hugo had caused all the agencies to allow many hastily trained and inexperienced caseworkers to make initial decisions on need. Nor did the guidelines anticipate a six month backlog on IFG processing. The Red Cross is a unique agency with its combination of authority and flexibility, and it is unfortunate that a few bad decisions (well publicized) will probably hinder its ability to serve for years to come.

I made bi-weekly visits to the FEMA Disaster Field Office (DFO) in Mt. View to check the progress of clients' cases and expedite corrections of errors, appeals, etc. With each visit, I noticed that the various agencies were becoming more disparate in their rates of service, speed of application processing, review of appeal, etc.

Most people were very helpful and informative, but there was a general acceptance of the backlogs and systems weaknesses, because it was just too big a job to try to change anything. No agency could move any faster than the others because each one had to do its separate part in the relief effort. Problems (and even huge errors) could be identified, but there was no instant correction. Recommendations could be sent through and notes put in the computer with a periodic check to see if action had been taken. It was a system that did not reward people for waiting patiently, as they were asked to do. Backlogs were so overwhelming that often nothing happened for weeks unless someone was checking. Although I appreciated the cooperation that I received, it was strange that I was able to find out more about a victim's case progress and recommendations than the victim himself. There was a general fear of liability for giving too much information or making even general commitments.

### **GLITCHES IN THE SYSTEM**

It was also clear that there was a vast inequity in quality of service, cooperation, and client assistance in general *within* the various agencies as well as between them. Some examples:

1. *Most of the legislation regarding eligibility for aid seemed to be written around the "Leave it to Beaver" lifestyle and in some areas this eliminated most of the population. Low income housing has been in increasingly short supply for the past several years and it is typically the first to go down in the earthquake.*

The regulations provide for one Temp Housing award per household (or address) if the applicant could prove residence for over 6 months. Because of overwhelming protest, particularly in San Francisco, the 6 month minimum was reduced to 30 days. However, because of another California law that gives renters certain rights after 30 days, for years almost all of the transient hotel and apartment owners have forced the residents to vacate for one night after every 29 days. This automatically disqualified some of the most needy victims. I understand that the Red Cross is assisting some of those who can demonstrate that they fit into this category.

In Watsonville, because of a low income housing shortage it was common for several families to share a large house. The single available Temp Housing award for these (presumably single family) dwellings was not split among all the heads of household, but given to the first one who applied for that address. Others who applied later were told to find the person who had the money and ask them to share it. In March, after increasing protest, the policy was modified to provide for some kind of prorating of the award among families based

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

on length of stay, amount of rent paid, etc. But weeks after the policy was changed, no one could explain exactly how this would be implemented, and in fact I don't think it ever was.

- 2. SBA Loan officers are allowed a great deal of autonomy in making or denying loans to disaster victims. Some, clearly used to dealing with business applicants where the applicant is able to produce accounting records, tax forms, etc., had no patience with the distraught housewife who couldn't fill in the forms.*

At one point, I was told that while 60% of the initial applications were being denied, 85% of the appeals were being approved. It is questionable why this double effort was necessary if the applicants qualified in the first place. Some applicants, on the other hand, were fortunate enough to have a creative loan officer and were offered the maximum loan, and in addition had part of their mortgage refinanced (at a lower interest rate) in order to bring their debt ratio down.

- 3. Almost everyone who was approved for an SBA loan was issued the first \$10,000 immediately, with instructions that the funds would be released in increments as long as they document that the previous amounts had been spent for the appropriate purpose. It was only after the first check had been spent on soil tests, permits, and deposits to contractors, that the borrowers requested the second batch of money, and were told that no more would be released until they could document where the total amount required would be obtained. In other words, if the person had an estimate of \$185,000 to rebuild and SBA had authorized \$100,000, SBA wanted to know where the other \$85,000 would be coming from.*

In theory, the IFG would be providing \$10,400 Calgrant would give \$10,000, and Caldap the remaining \$64, but the SBA wanted to see this in writing. However, the only way to enter the grant programs was a referral from SBA stating that:

- The applicant did not qualify for any SBA loan, or
- A loan was approved but there were disaster caused needs that would not be met by the amount. Loan amounts could be insufficient either because the SBA had determined that applicant was unable to repay the full amount needed or because the needs exceeded the maximum SBA personal limits of \$100,000 for real property and \$20,000 for personal property.

But the SBA was not finalizing these loans, because they did not want to commit to the approved amount until the applicant could first show IN WRITING a commitment from the other sources of aid. It was the classic Catch 22 in which the SBA would not give the victim the documentation which would allow him/her to obtain the documentation that SBA was demanding. This situation continues to be difficult to resolve because no agency feels responsible to see that there is a resolution (and everyone agrees that no one tells the SBA what to do).

To add insult to injury, one client who was stuck in this position received the first payment request and was being charged interest on the entire \$100,000 even though the SBA was refusing to give her access to \$90,000 of the loan. I can only assume that this was policy.

Even after a grant application is forwarded from SBA, the IFG program ~~is~~ still way behind in processing. As of March 23rd, there were about 6,000 new applications and 1,000 appeals that had not been reviewed. They were being processed at the rate of about 200/day, but were further delayed by the decision of the State Dept. of Social Services (administering the



## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

Only the destroyed portions are included in the estimates, but it is difficult to replace only 20 square feet of foundation. And often new pipe cannot be fitted on to old plumbing parts and the whole fixture must be replaced, with FEMA paying only for the portion that actually broke during the earthquake. There is a formula and price guide in the FEMA computer, which multiplies out an amount for each item code entered by an inspector and determines the amount of the award.

These often inadequate initial inspections, in my opinion result in a much higher cost to the government (taxpayer) than another system might, mostly because anyone with real need is forced to appeal. This necessitates not only another inspection, but additional administration cost all the way down the line. (I later heard that one inspector had performed over 4,000 inspections in 7 months, earning close to \$100,000.)

5. *Normally, applicants are given an SBA application to fill in before any grant awards are made, because the system provides that they should repay the aid if possible. An SBA "Summary Denial" may be given to those who clearly cannot afford a loan (usually the disabled, single mothers, seniors on fixed income) eliminating the need for them to go through the entire application process only to be turned down.*

A systems error at the Los Gatos DAC (Disaster Application Center) caused those people to be dropped from processing instead of referred directly into the grant programs, as they were told they would be. One SBA representative had been consistently sending the wrong color copy of the Summary Denial form to computer data input. Because data input was miles away and the clerk did not have instructions to enter data from anything but the yellow copies, these denials were thrown into a pile until someone had time to check on them. The computer showed only that the victim received the SBA application and never completed and returned it. Historically about 25% of the loan applications sent out are never returned and these applications are closed out after 60 days on the assumption that the victim found other resources or does not want a loan.

This "color" problem was discovered in early December, but agency representatives are still largely unaware of it. These applicants find it almost impossible to find out why the system shows them as not having returned their SBA application. When those who have been waiting patiently for the grant award finally inquire, they find that they must start again. IF AND WHEN they manage to re-enter the system, they will be in line after thousands of others who had filed later than they had. Correcting this error has been difficult even with the advocacy of people who understand the problem and know the terminology. Many applicants (by definition those with the greatest financial need) will possibly give up and be dropped from the system.

The FEMA Director has now asked SBA to cross check the list of people showing in the FEMA computer as never having returned their SBA application. If the SBA would identify those who had actually been sent applications, the IFGP could use the process of elimination to identify those who received the Summary Denial. The SBA has not agreed to this request.

6. *While many victims are struggling to pay rent and a mortgage (even with the Temp Housing assistance, there are additional expenses such as storage, soil tests, permits, appraisals, etc.), they are reading daily in the paper that millions of dollars have been donated for their aid and comfort. There is no centrally coordinated source for information on all of the different relief funds available and*

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

*frustrated people must phone everywhere telling their "story" over and over in search of specific types of help.*

7. *Communication with the applicant regarding the progress (or lack of it) of the case is not considered a necessity by the government agencies, until somebody calls in to ask. For instance, if there was more than one primary applicant by the same last name at the same address, all FEMA files were marked "duplicate" and no further action was taken unless someone called to inquire (at which time they were told to start the application process again). There seemed to be a certain presumption that if duplicate applications were received, it was conscious fraud on the part of the applicant. However there were several very innocent reasons for this occurrence:*
  - *In the first few weeks, when people phoned the hotline asking why they hadn't heard anything, they were told that there was no record of their case in the computer and they should re-apply. This was actually due to a huge back-log in data entry and when both applications were eventually entered, they were summarily frozen as duplicate applications.*
  - *Other people who were frustrated with the wait and confusion, mistakenly thought that if they applied 2 or 3 times it would increase their chances of getting timely attention (like buying more than one lottery ticket).*
  - *Also, many extended families with the same surname living on the same property were unaware that none of their applications was making progress.*

Likewise, no explanation is sought by FEMA for other types of conflicting or unusual data. The case is merely frozen until someone calls in.

8. *The FEMA Hotline, where all questions are supposed to be referred, was incessantly busy. When the victim finally got through, there was no immediate gratification because there are no computers in the room with the telephones. Message sheets with questions are written out for the appropriate agency (SBA, IFGP, FEMA, etc.) and delivered the next day. Someone from the appropriate agency is supposed to call the applicant back. If the applicant had questions concerning all 3 agencies, they would be sent out separately for response because no one is allowed to represent an agency other than his or her own.*

Many people do not have access to a telephone during the day (assembly line workers, deliverymen, construction workers, etc.). Sometimes, if the agency tried unsuccessfully 2 or 3 times to return the call, the message would be dropped until the person re-initiated the question.

Part of the popularity of the United Way client advocacy program was the ability to address the entire situation as a whole. Even though I could not officially speak for any agency, I was able to explain how they were interacting with each other in the client's application. Because I understood the pitfalls of the relief system, I was better able to unravel the tangle of conflicting information and demands.

# Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

## **CONCLUSION:**

One of the main shortcomings of the entire disaster assistance program is the lack of any one entity that is responsible to see that the victim receives the necessary aid to meet minimum needs. There is nothing to be done if an application is bogged down in the system. Bank foreclosures, eviction notices, notices from city or county governments that certain actions must be taken (such as demolition) immediately, and even terminal illness are some of the reasons that applicants might require special attention. But there is no way for the applicant to get around the Hotline where it is explained again and again how it is impossible to speed things up. In particular, victims whose cases have been stuck between agencies due to a systems weakness or mishandling, cannot expect to be placed at the head of the line when the problem is finally straightened out.

It was a relief to know that the Santa Cruz County United Way hired a counterpart to this position to continue the client advocacy function. As it gets further from the time of the disaster, more than ever, earthquake victims feel they have no advocacy. Disaster relief workers are responsible not to exceed their respective agencies' parameters for assistance, but there is no one responsible to make sure that the clients' basic disaster related needs are covered by someone, somewhere. The service centers are closed, the hotline is impersonal, the media is gone, and the general public is tired of the whole thing. There is a subtle sentiment that the victims should be back on their feet by now (this is similar to the view that the homeless are that way by choice).

I developed and taught an advocacy class this year at the annual Red Cross Disaster institute in Sacramento, which incorporated some of the information learned during this assignment. Hopefully, in future disasters, there will be several cross trained Client Advocates who will not be limited by the restrictions or guidelines of any one agency.

## **JULY 1990 UPDATE**

Although I am no longer officially in the "disaster" business, I kept in touch with some of the more difficult cases to try to make sure they didn't get stuck somewhere again. Some are on their 6th and 7th FEMA inspection trying to get the assessed need to include all of the items that contractors and engineers are saying need attention. At the Red Cross Disaster Institute, Lee Sapaden, from the State Department of Social Services (which administers the IFGP) gave a presentation at the Client Advocate Class and we were able to ask him about some of the problems.

I asked why the amounts for each line item were so low on the grant awards. He said that the amounts for personal items were taken from the Sears Roebuck Catalog and updated annually. For building repairs, local contractors were contacted after each disaster and asked for prices on various types of repairs. Unfortunately, there is no commitment on the part of the contractors to actually do the work for that price and as work increases, Lee said that many of the contractors start raise their prices, leaving the victims with inadequate grants. In the mountain areas, many contractors would not even come out and do an estimate without charging \$50 to \$300, a few which is not covered by any agency. This is not the only reason for inadequate grants, however.

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

The Interfaith groups are interfacing with the Red Cross/FEMA Liaison and assisting victims with their appeals for re-inspection. And the Red Cross temporarily reopened two service centers (but did not expand their view of emergency assistance so again, a lot of time was spent explaining to people why they should be OK by now).

Many people still don't have the basic components they need to get their lives back together. At one point I went to Congressman Norm Mineta's office to explain how the lack of relief coordination was causing delay, frustration and waste. I did not feel that any one particular agency or person was "bad", it was just the pitfalls and delays within and between them that made it impossible to do anything quickly or efficiently.

His aid explained to me that he could not influence any of the County or State programs because he was a Federal Congressman. He also could not do much about problems with SBA, because they are an independent agency that really doesn't have to listen to Congress. That left only FEMA, and the aid said that I was welcome to express any problems I was having with FEMA. I have no problem with FEMA, only with a system in which no one finds it imperative to coordinate.

As with so many bureaucracies, the agencies almost function for their own sake, with multiple goals in addition to assistance to the victim. Auditors may come years later, and a single flexible interpretation of a regulation could lead to large disallowances, which would be deducted from future funding. For that reason, staff might be reprimanded for bending the guidelines where it seemed appropriate (or humane), but is seldom disciplined for slow or inadequate service. By definition, career workers are the ones that do "business as usual" under any circumstances and those who do not go strictly by the book do not rise to positions of power.

I have heard that there has still been no resolution to the SBA's refusal to release the balance of loans until people can show where the entire amount needed is coming from. It is a source of increasing frustration, which no one seems ready to deal with. The SBA is focused on making business deals and protecting their investments. They have no instructions to make sure the victims are able to actually use the loans they approve. They will be the first to state that they are responsible to see that the money is repaid and they do not make exceptions just because the applicant has recently suffered a loss. Perhaps if they did, and it resulted in a large number of defaults, they would later be condemned in the same way the Guaranteed Student Loan Program was.

The obvious question is "Why are we spending so much money and making no one happy?" This disjointed relief effort seems to be due mainly to a patchwork of federal, state, and local legislation's which don't quite fit together. In an attempt to avoid duplication of service the victim is forced to move through agencies one at a time instead of simultaneously. The inability to increase efficiency and cut administrative costs by combining services (such as FEMA and SBA) are political issues that are probably more focused on protecting jobs and "turf" than efficient service.

There are some elements of a major disaster which assure that the relief effort will never be "perfect". First, because of the unpredictability and fluctuating need, there cannot be an unlimited number of trained staff and volunteers constantly ready to go anywhere with no notice. Secondly, people who have set aside their routines to go to a disaster, cannot stay indefinitely. Consequently every 3 to 4 weeks there is a major change of staffing and a loss of

## Disaster Assistance After the Loma Prieta Earthquake

continuity in service. Thirdly, because most workers are from out of the area, there are often culture gaps and a lack of empathy with the victims.

Politicians might want to examine the priorities of the entire disaster planning and relief system. As in many other areas, needs change and there is on one to make sure that actions move along with them. We can only look forward to more situations such as this one because increased population makes it much more likely that any disaster will create a human need. At a time when the Federal deficit is making emergency appropriations more and more difficult, over 3/4 of the FEMA budget is still dedicated to, preparing for possible nuclear attack from outside. If this money was pulled from planning on a unlikely event and dedicated to mitigation and planning for events that we are virtually certain will happen, the need for emergency aid after a disaster will be greatly reduced. It was incredible to watch as the planned budgets for reinforcing buildings and roads steadily decreased with the adrenaline level. Public shortsightedness will cost them a great deal more in lives and money later, but politicians do not want to take a chance on forcing an unpopular project.

In addition, there are the differing assumptions regarding what people should be entitled to after a disaster and the real purpose of disaster assistance. Some of the anger and disappointment of the victims was the result of false expectations. Many saw the relief program as a sort of free insurance policy with no deductible. At the Red Cross I received angry letters from a few people demanding that we use the well publicized \$12,000,000 of donations to replace their crystalwine glasses, Ming Vases, and silk underwear (at full value). At the other end of the spectrum, some victims (mostly senior citizens) never even applied for aid because they equated it with welfare and had "never taken a penny from the government in their lives".

There are valid questions about who is entitled to what, and under what circumstances. For instance, a person whose house burned down one week after the earthquake (with no relationship to the disaster) would receive vouchers for a few days' food and hotel from the Red Cross and would have no access to grants or low interest loans. He/she is a disaster victim and the loss is just as great, but he/she is out of luck concerning public funds for recovery. How much responsibility should people have for the events in their lives and where would they get the idea that someone is going to "make everything like before". Immediately after a disaster is no time to be educating the public on what they might expect, because they are frightened and confused, but people typically do not seek out information before they need it. If the goals were clearly laid out, systems could be steered in the direction of meeting them.

I have been a Red Cross disaster volunteer for over 7 years, but it has not been my profession and my experiences have been only with local fires, floods, and earthquakes. What I have written here is purely some of my experiences, which might be of help to other disaster workers. I feel that much of the stress that victims suffer could be lessened if they had a better idea of how the disaster relief system works. Although everyone agrees that improvements can be made, the disaster relief system is so intricate, cumbersome, and uncoordinated that it is not likely to change very much in the near future. And no one really has the power or the responsibility to make it work.