

Operation O.C. reaches out to Katrina families

By Sue Sailhamer

TUSTIN — While others make plans for Christmas, families left homeless by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are still putting pieces of their lives back together. Each story is different, but the needs are sadly the same. For those who have relocated to Orange County, Operation O.C. offers help and hope for building a new life.

Operating a resource center from barracks on what used to be the Tustin Marine Air Base, Operation O.C. is a partnership of public and private agencies offering help to families and individuals displaced by the hurricanes.

Jessica Mitchell, coordinator for Project O.C., said the idea for a multi-agency effort came from Jim Palmer, president of the Orange County Rescue Mission.

"It is the first time we have

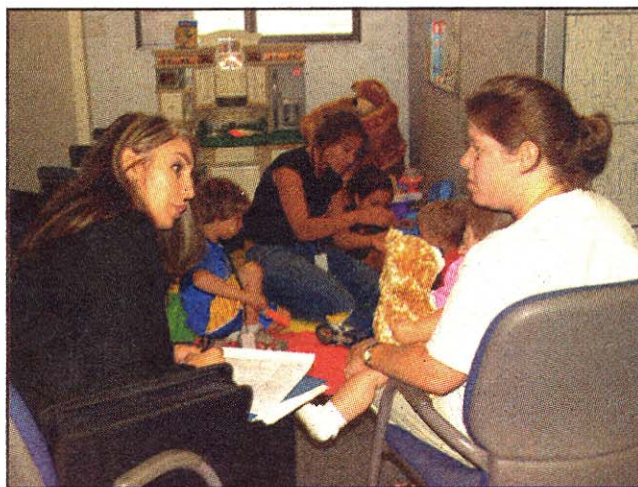
worked on meeting a national need and the first time that a faith-based organization has taken the lead and the county has followed," Palmer said. "The rescue mission was well positioned in its credibility with 42 years of history to do something extraordinary."

Even so, Mitchell said, they were uncertain how many evacuees would be seeking their services.

The uncertainty was short lived. By mid-November Operation O.C. had provided services to 547 evacuees from 243 families.

"We've had families with six kids that are living in a motel room," Mitchell said.

She explained how the resource center connects evacuees to the help they need, whether it be housing, clothing, food or transportation. Those coming for help are assigned a volunteer partner to go over a list



Social Services case manager, Elva Rivas, provides resource counseling to hurricane Katrina evacuee, Lisa Allison, at OperationOC's Resource Center, the county's leader in Katrina relief efforts.

of services that Operation O.C. partner agencies provide. The center distributes bus passes, meal vouchers, phone cards, food and clothing as needed. Six case managers are ready to help.

Multi-agency approach

Partner organizations include Info Link, Catholic Charities, Second Harvest Food Bank, Orange

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County Department of Education, Home Aid of Orange County, the American Red Cross, United Way, Orange Coast Interfaith Shelter, Rock Harbor Church, Anaheim Vineyard and Calvary Church, to name a few.

"I feel like God called me to this work," Mitchell said. "It is where my heart is—helping people."

The Orange County Rescue Mission is heading up the collaborative effort from the future site of its Village of Hope and has expedited construction on the project to better serve the needs of hurricane victims.

Scheduled to open next fall, the Village of Hope's five-acre site will include a medical clinic, child development and adult education centers, as well as transitional housing for homeless individuals and families, a dining complex and chapel.

"It will be the most comprehensive facility in the country," Palmer said.