

#1 – Blackfeet Hurricane Relief

Blackfeet Manpower heads south to help with hurricane relief By JARED MILLER Tribune
Regional Reporter

More than 100 workers from the Blackfeet Reservation boarded commercial flights at Great Falls International Airport on Monday en route to hurricane relief jobs in the South.

One hundred more workers are trained and ready to join the relief efforts as soon as they are needed, said Elaine Grant, of the Blackfeet Manpower program.

"We're just waiting for a call from (Washington) D.C.," Grant said.

FEMA asked the Blackfeet in early October to provide 500 workers for hurricane relief efforts.

The tribe is part of the national emergency management system. More than 600 tribal members are certified in federal emergency response training.

"We ran out of people so fast, and we put out a call to fire departments and others who had (the federal training)," said Ed Conley, public relations officer with FEMA's Denver office.

Most of the reservation workers are unemployed or work on seasonal wildland firefighting crews. Unemployment figures are much higher on the reservation than for the rest of the state.

The workers signed contracts for up to six months of relief work at \$22.50 an hour, Grant said.

"To our understanding, they'll be working 10- to 12-hour days with no days off," Grant said.

Initially flagged for cleanup efforts following hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it looks like the workers will be redirected to Orlando, Fla. to handle fallout from the latest Atlantic Hurricane: Wilma.

Wilma ripped across the southern portion of the Florida Peninsula Monday morning.

Among those who boarded planes Monday was 34-year-old Anona Boy Wright of Browning.

Boy Wright is taking leave from a union construction job to work in Florida. She's doing it for the money, but she's also doing it to be of service.

"It's not just about the pay," said Boy Wright, who is leaving behind her husband and 10-year-old son to work. "It's about helping the unfortunate in an unfortunate event."

Alfred Still Smoking, a seasonal firefighter, helped with last year's hurricane relief efforts in Florida. He's going again this year to help the suffering and to earn good wages.

He'll use the money he earns to pay bills and to assure a good holiday season for his family.

"It's an opportunity for us to help out where we're needed," said Still Smoking, whose firefighting season was cut short this year by mild weather resulting in few fires.

The Blackfeet Tribe's response to FEMA's call for workers was quick and extensive.

Several divisions of tribal government shifted their focus temporarily to ready workers for the jobs.

FEMA requires workers to have driver's licenses, bank accounts with money, credit cards, federal emergency training and a criminal record free of felonies.

In response, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council made \$500 loans to each worker and provided each with a credit card number.

Native American Bank in Browning set up bank accounts for the workers.

The Blackfeet Tribal Court stayed open late to perform background checks.

Workers from a number of tribal departments, including Housing, Manpower, the Women, Infants and Children program and others, chipped in to help with the work.

The Blackfeet Manpower Office has been open 11 to 13 hours a day, seven days a week since Sept. 14, Grant said.

The state Department of Motor Vehicles also is getting involved.

The agency is pulling together a team of examiners to provide driver's license testing in Browning, said Glacier County Commissioner Michael DesRosier.

Many tribal members don't have driver's licenses, and the only county testing center is in Cut Bank. Testing could start next week in Browning, DesRosier said.

Reach Tribune Regional Reporter Jared Miller at (406) 791-6573, (800) 438-6600 or at jarmille@greatfal.gannett.com.

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TRIBUNE PHOTO BY STUART S. WHITE

Anona Boy Wright goes through airport security as firefighters from Browning depart Monday morning to join hurricane relief workers on the Gulf Coast.

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