

Benefits nil for illegal immigrants;

1.2 million Mexicans live in areas hit by hurricanes

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Byline: BY EDWIN GARCIA; Knight Ridder News Service

Body

BILOXI, Miss. -- Victor Garcia thought he was going to die when he darted out of his apartment in sandals during last month's **hurricane** and saw refrigerators and roofs flying overhead.

But what he's encountered in the weeks after **Hurricane** Katrina is almost as bad, he said.

Unlike most Gulf Coast residents who lost all their personal property, Garcia, 37, won't be contacting the Federal Emergency Management Agency for help. No cash grants, no loans. No new shoes, no furniture for his temporary apartment, no replacing his old Honda Civic.

Garcia is one of thousands of **illegal immigrants** who moved to Mississippi in the past 10 years to help satisfy labor demands at coastal casinos, but who don't qualify for FEMA money because they're in the country without authorization.

"It's not fair," Garcia said from outside a moldy-smelling apartment he shares with four other men.

Federal aid should be applied to all who suffered from the **hurricane**, regardless of immigration status, Garcia said, "because we're human."

More than **1.2 million Mexicans live** in **areas hit** by **Hurricanes** Rita and Katrina, many of them illegally, though it's unknown how many were affected.

Mexican consulates in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama have provided assistance to more than 1,600 Katrina victims, according to the Mexican Embassy.

The Mexican government hasn't yet totaled how many nationals affected by Rita have been helped, said Adhemir Olguin, the consular spokesman in Houston, but the number is expected to be minimal. A telephone line made available for Mexican nationals seeking help after Rita hasn't received any calls for assistance, Olguin said.

The majority of southern Mississippi's Mexican men are believed to have worked in maintenance jobs at coastal casinos; the women handled housekeeping chores in hotels.

Although workers in the United States must provide employers with verification of legal residency when applying for jobs, the demands for cheap labor are so great that the law is routinely skirted.

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"We're useful, and they pay us cheap," said Garcia, who, along with his roommates, earned \$7 an hour doing janitorial work at the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino, which was severely damaged when Katrina made landfall Aug. 29.

In an ironic twist, he now makes \$8 cleaning up debris, and employers no longer face sanctions for knowingly hiring **illegal immigrants**. The reason is that many Katrina victims lost their documentation in the storm, according to the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees immigration.

Labor and immigration experts predict more undocumented workers will move to the Gulf Coast because of the relaxed rules and available demolition and construction jobs.

That doesn't sit well with organizations that advocate against **illegal** immigration.

"People who lost everything, including their jobs, are now going to find themselves having to compete with workers who are in the country illegally," said Ira Mehlman, the media director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

"What has happened ought to increase the amount of enforcement, not decrease it," he said.

The Mexican government has pitched in to help, offering **immigrants** one-way plane tickets to Mexico. It also has opened bank accounts in both countries to help **hurricane** victims.

Some **immigrants** are expecting to receive federal help because of a little-known program that allows undocumented parents to apply for FEMA aid through their U.S.-born children.

After Roberto Mata, a 31-year-old father of three, learned about the program, he debated for two weeks whether to apply. To do so, he would have to provide his children's Social Security numbers.

"I was scared of being thrown in jail, of being deported," Mata said, "and I feared I would have to abandon my family."

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