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Underserved R Undeserved?

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Underserved *R* Underserved?

Commentary

Sheila P. Davis, Ph.D., R.N.

I noted that as I entered the room, the conversation came to what seemed like an abrupt halt. However, the musing and laughter continued. Anxious to get in on the joke, I asked, what were you all talking about? They replied, "we were talking about using marksmen to shoot the looters in New Orleans." That was so funny! Those words continued to reverberate in my head, along with visual images of people lying in the streets, having succumbed to sharp shooters commissioned to shoot to kill during the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Looters will not be tolerated! Was the message of local and state government officials? Stated differently, this message could be interpreted as meaning, looters deserve to die, no questions asked. But, I said to myself, What if they were getting food to feed their families, or the elderly and children? Perhaps there were people stealing who had lost all of their material possessions and had no capacity to earn any money? Would they be taken into consideration? And, what if they had lost their family members in the deluge? The mood of the group told me their sordid belief was that these people deserve just what is coming to them. No questions asked. Shoot!

As much as we try, it seems these people continue to present as a problem for the thriving, economically stable, healthcare insured majority. The legitimate term coined to describe them is the Underserved. They are, by and large, poor, ethnic minority, women, poorly educated, and in some instances, first generation immigrants. There is a striking similarity between the profile of the looters and the underserved. While we are upfront in acknowledging that they are underserved, it seems as though we are less willing to engage in the critical dialogue as to why they are underserved. Sure, we have programs and initiatives which acknowledge their disparities, but what about the root causes of the disparities? I'm afraid that a growing body of people is beginning to think that these people are the problem and that they are undeserving of more. Some say, why should we use our tax dollars to help those who won't help themselves? I work hard for my money and so should they! I ask do we know that the underserved are not trying to help themselves? It is much easier to judge than to challenge our stereotypes by seeing the problem from another perspective isn't it?

Interestingly, immediately after the hurricane in my area, I witnessed an outpouring of sympathy, compassion and response to the human suffering brought on by this blow of nature. For a moment in time, we were united in caring for the unfortunate. No one said they brought this on themselves. We were a health care family responding to the needs of our extended family. The only underserved were those who were out of reach. Our challenge as we move to normalcy following Katrina is to examine those beliefs and ideologies surrounding the underserved. If we fail to critically address issues that inform of the causes for poverty, to many, the underserved will be defined and treated as the undeserved. Also remember that nature does not discriminate. Tomorrow, we could be the underserved or underserved.