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## **Eight Vista firefighters to rebuild Katrina homes**

### **Crew of 20 will go to Gulf Coast area**

**By Elena Gaona**  
STAFF WRITER

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VISTA – For once, their mission is to build up, not tear down.

Eight Vista Fire Department firefighters are headed to the Gulf Coast as part of a 20-member crew that will reconstruct storm-damaged homes next week.

“Firefighters can be very destructive” when they are trying to put fires out, said Vista firefighter Vincent Kennedy, 48. “A lot of us like to create things with our hands, instead of pulling them apart, on our days off.”

One requirement to be part of the newly formed San Diego County Hurricane Katrina Task Force construction crews is that volunteers be skilled or semiskilled construction workers.

All eight of the Vista firefighters say they know how to handle a hammer. Some got started by doing construction work on the side to make more money. Others helped friends build homes, or worked on projects to improve the fire station, such as installing new cabinets. Most have built a garage, second floor or new wing to their own homes.

“We’re all do-it-yourself guys,” firefighter Ned Vander Pol said. “Drywall, roofing, painting, you name it.”

Headed to Mississippi on Sunday are Vista firefighters Rich Wilkinson of Oceanside, who is also president of the Vista Firefighters Association, Kelcey Sass of Oceanside, Kennedy of Carlsbad, Samuel Craig of San Diego, Brendan Halle of Vista, Martin Parish of Temecula, Don Shellhammer of Vista and Vander Pol of San Marcos.

The men join 10 volunteers from San Diego and two from Oregon on the first of many construction crew trips organized and funded through the Hurricane Katrina Task Force.

The task force kicked off a \$1 million fundraising campaign in San Marcos yesterday, spearheaded by businesswoman Julie Lowen, the San Diego nonprofit International Relief Teams and four North County cities.

Escondido and San Marcos presented \$25,000 each to the task force yesterday, Vista gave \$20,000 and Del Mar presented \$2,000.

The task force plans to reach out to all the cities in the county. Six trips are planned so far, but the goal is to keep sending construction crews for years, officials said.

The teams will work with a national agency, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, to identify where their help is needed.

Most of those who need help are poor and elderly, said Lowen, who founded the task force after she visited the Gulf Coast in November with local officials. The group noticed that what people need most is skilled help on their houses, she said.

“They told us, ‘You can give me food forever, but I need a place to live,’ ” Lowen said. “They need to be able to get into their own houses. We saw an 85-year-old woman living in a tent, freezing at night.”

Drywalling, roofing, framing and flooring will be some of the top priorities for the crews, headed first to Mississippi, where some homes are cleared of debris and ready to be worked on, said Barry La Forgia, International Relief Teams executive director.

The money raised by the local task force will pay for travel expenses and tools for the skilled volunteers, Lowen said. The first trip of 20 volunteers costs \$14,000.

“I want to make this a North County effort,” Vista Councilman Steve Gronke said. “Julie wants it to be countywide, but we’ll take it one step at a time.”

Volunteers and money are still needed, organizers said.

Donations may be sent to: Hurricane Katrina Task Force, care of California Community Bank, 905 S. Santa Fe Ave., Vista, CA, 92083.

To volunteer to be part of the crew, call (619) 284-7979 or go to [www.irteams.org](http://www.irteams.org)

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