

From Carol Sanchez, interviewed by John Swann, 12 September 2007

JS: So, I'm curious. With so much of the staff quite distracted, talk me through the process of how the work gets done in a situation like this.

CS: Well, for the work on the coast, we brought in people from around the country and from here, investigators from Tennessee went down and worked in New Orleans. We didn't send any of the New Orleans investigators back to New Orleans to work because (a) they wouldn't have been able to focus, and (b) it would have been really hard not to go to your house and do something rather than do work, because that's who we are. And so as far as like trying to verify that bad food wasn't being sold and medical drugs and biologic products that needed to be kept at certain temperatures -- that those were protected and off the market -- we sent other people.

And so the staff that came here, the investigative staff that came here, we gave projects like official establishment inventory updating and things they could do with part of their brain while they were making phone calls to their insurance adjuster, family members, FEMA, Red Cross, all those things that you can only do during the day. So we kind of just like put blinders on and let them do what they needed to do because that was what they needed to do. Those were things. And so we didn't really pressure the people who'd evacuated to do things.

JS: What was the situation with the states, with Louisiana, with Mississippi, with Alabama, and so on, and their food and drug responsibilities, especially with respect to

the things that we do jointly with them? Did it take a long time for that to get back online?

CS: It was dicey. They lost -- and Louisiana was the most impacted because of the New Orleans flood -- so they lost not only track of their people, but they lost a couple of people. I mean, there were a couple of people who died. And so they were short-staffed. They wanted us, as in FDA, to do more, and they had a really awful director at the time who, thank you, has retired.

JS: Is this the state Food and Drug?

CS: Yeah. And so we met with them on the phone every day. We had people down from Atlanta and various other parts of the country working there with the state, and we had David LeRay, and we had a lot of people. Our Baton Rouge office was still intact, so our investigators at Baton Rouge were still there working with the state. And we were trying to coordinate with the state, but the state was as distraught as everybody, and so they kept asking for impossible things and making impossible demands of FDA, like give them three boats and dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. And we kept having to say, "We can't do that, but we will do this." We didn't have enough resources. So we shipped a bunch of people down there, and then they were complaining because there were too many people and they didn't have enough people to give them instructions. I mean, there was a period of probably a month when working with the state was sheer hell. It was horrible, I would say, because I was on those calls while Tyler was on all of the logistic calls for

Headquarters. I was on the calls for the state, going, “Stop complaining. Don’t yell at me. If you yell at me, I will hang up. I am doing the best I can do.” And it was dicey for a while. But we got through it. We eventually managed to figure out a way that the state could be placated somewhat.

But they had very impossible demands, and they wouldn’t write the paperwork correctly. So if they wanted to get something from FEMA, like if you get extra money from FEMA to help pay for some of the stuff they were doing, they have to prepare a proposal, and it’s not that difficult. But they would say, “Need assistance.”

JS: That’s it?

CS: Yeah. I mean, really. And I’d go, “You have to say how many people you want, where you want them, what you want them to do, because otherwise no one’s going to touch that paper.” And they would, you know.

So we have two investigators, Barbara Wright and Dana Daigle, who were in Baton Rouge, so they ended up writing the FEMA request for the state because we couldn’t get the state to do it right.

JS: But just so we make it clear here, these are activities that the state normally would carry out itself, right?

CS: Yes. You know, one of the first goals for the state was to get -- and it makes sense -- get the restaurants reopened, get the grocery stores reopened, and those are areas

that we don't routinely deal with. So we brought in retail specialists from all over the United States to work with the state, because it was also relatively unsafe, so you couldn't just go by yourself. And so the state wouldn't, they wanted to go to all these places, but they didn't want their investigators alone, and they wanted our investigators, like misery loves company or safety in numbers. I'm not sure. So we brought our people in, and they paired up. And so they did.

They visited every retail establishment. And, of course, most of them, when we first got there, were still boarded up, bombed out, whatever, and so then they'd have to go back. And then we'd put notes on their doors, you know, "When you come back, call this number so that we can get you reopened." And that was the state, and I understand that. I mean, that was the initial desire. And that's not a function that we normally perform, but we did. So our investigators from here who went down weren't doing the manufacturers or the wholesalers or anything because those were far away from the immediate needs. So they would go out with the state and do restaurant inspections or retail establishment inspections.

JS: So they'd do these with state officials, with local municipal officials, like in New Orleans, say?

CS: Yes.

JS: Okay.