

Arkansas-based firm helps special-needs students displaced by Hurricane Katrina

MOUNTAIN HOME, Ark. - When Hurricane Katrina struck on August 29, 2005, forcing hundreds of Gulf Coast schools to close, the records of most special education students were safe with a company whose disaster plan worked. That company, Computer Automation Systems of Mountain Home, stores records electronically in a Dallas facility and has backups in Atlanta.

"Because we host the data, we can transfer the information so schools receiving displaced students can pick up the educational process as soon as possible," said Darren Johnson, States Coordinator for Computer Automation. Schools receiving special education students from Mississippi and Louisiana may contact Computer Automation Systems for records by calling toll free 877-221-7327 or e-mailing emily@seasweb.net for instructions on how to provide the proper documentation.

Johnson and others at Computer Automation Systems are working with the Arkansas Department of Education Special Education Unit and the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Special Education to transfer records of displaced students to the schools which need them. Requests for records also have come from as far away as Alaska and Florida.

Johnson said, "These Gulf coastal districts have been longtime customers and good friends, and we are very concerned about their well being. We're glad that we, as a company, can help students in this time of devastation." He said employees of CAS came together and contributed money and hard work to help residents displaced by Katrina. Johnson said students will not have to go through lengthy evaluations of their special needs because their individualized educational plans (IEPs) are intact and ready for their new schools. "They have been through a traumatic experience, and we're glad we can contribute in this way."

Johnson said CAS is also accepting donations to help families get through the next three to six months while they wait for assistance from their insurance companies or federal disaster funds. Donations can be sent to Computer Automation Systems, P.O. Box 590, Mountain Home, AR 72654, with checks made payable to CAS Relief Fund.

Mississippi's Director of Special Education, Dr. Melody Bounds, said 85 percent of Mississippi schools use Computer Automation's SEAS™ software to develop IEPs and manage special education data. "The ability to transfer needed information between districts and even across states for students with disabilities who are displaced due to Hurricane Katrina has been extremely valuable," she said.

Dr. Bounds added, "Computer Automation has worked tirelessly to assist impacted districts, whether those districts are SEAS™ customers or not, in getting what they need to help children."

Marcia Harding, Associate Director of Special Education in Arkansas, said Computer Automation is working to provide the information to help more than 40 displaced students now receiving special education in Arkansas. "While we are mindful of the need for family privacy and student confidentiality, we are gratified that Computer Automation has offered a solution for educational record access of displaced special education students."

Disaster recovery was one of Computer Automation's aims from the start, Johnson said. For their customers in the South, weather events like hurricanes and tornadoes are risks. Also, the types of records created with Computer Automation Systems software are not easily replaced. Each state follows its own regulations and formats, and each student's plan is compiled by a team at the school, including special education and classroom teachers, parents, and the child, if appropriate.

"Special-needs" students may have impairments in vision, hearing, speech, movement, learning disabilities, autism, emotional disturbance, mental retardation, and even temporary injuries which require accommodations at school.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said 226 schools had closed in Mississippi and 489 schools closed in Louisiana, affecting a total of 372,000 students. About 15 percent of students, on average nationally, are special-needs students.

Computer Automation Systems serves about 85 percent of Mississippi school districts, 100 percent of Arkansas school districts, and 27 percent of Louisiana districts. They have 1,500 school district

customers nationwide in 27 states, servicing more than a million IEPs daily, company literature states.

Mississippi's Department of Education Katrina Recovery Information Web page

(www.mde.k12.ms.us/Katrina/faq/) lists Computer Automation Systems' contact information.

Computer Automation Systems is the creator of SEAS™, a Web based data management system for educators in special education. Harvey B. Hughes is president of the 13-year old company in Mountain Home.