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Governor thanks volunteers

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LONG BEACH - Gov. Haley Barbour said Wednesday there continues to be a good stream of help coming to South Mississippi as he mingled with 250 volunteers building a KaBOOM! playground in Long Beach.

Barbour was on the Coast to see the playground being built by volunteers from the United Jewish Communities; Alpha Epsilon Pi, the Jewish Fraternity of North America; Long Beach residents; and others who participated in raising the funds and in construction.

Some students from the Hillel Community Day School in North Miami Beach, Fla., said they would put in a full day's work each day of their trip, but it was worth it. It's an attitude Barbour said is common among volunteers and that the stream of support is proof the world cares.

"They say, 'I got more out of this for myself.' It's great," Barbour said. "We want them to know how grateful Mississippians are."

The UJC has raised \$28 million for the Gulf Coast since the storm, said Associate Director Jerry M. Rosen, who added there is a national perception that things are OK here because Hurricane Katrina isn't in the news as much as it was 18 months ago.

Speaking passionately about South Mississippi, Rosen said he has made it a point to spend more time here because he doesn't think there is as much help coming into this area as to New Orleans.

Students from Hillel said they have been amazed by the stories they have heard from Katrina survivors.

"It is shocking to hear from these brave kids," said Junior Amalia Hirsch. "One said, 'I only lost the first floor of my house.' If I lost my first floor, I would have no house."

Barbour also wheeled into Pass Christian and joined Mayor Chipper McDermott to tour newly built homes.

Rebuilding was a theme of the day, as the crew of some 250 volunteers built the park, replacing equipment that was more than 50 years old with new items chosen by local kids in a design session in January. Carolyn Stallings, executive director of the Long Beach Civic Club, said members of the group have wanted new playground equipment for a long time.

"It has been a long process, but it has become a reality today," Stallings said.

KaBOOM! CEO and co-founder Darell Hammond said Wednesday his group has built 43 playgrounds in Louisiana and Mississippi since the storm and the goal is to build 100 - but if they reach it, more will be built.

He said there is much work to be done for both his group and South Mississippi at large.

"The work is just beginning," he said. "We are not even in the middle yet."