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Housing Promises Made to Evacuees Have Fallen Short

Red Cross to Halt Hotel Stipends in 2 Weeks, And Hundreds of Shelters Have Closed

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Two weeks before President Bush's mid-October goal for moving Hurricane Katrina victims out of shelters, more than 100,000 people still reside in such makeshift housing, and 400,000 more are in hotel rooms costing up to \$100 a night.

Housing options promised by the federal government a month ago have largely failed to materialize. Cruise ships and trailer parks have so far proved in large part to be unworkable, while an American Red Cross program -- paid for by the federal government -- that allows storm victims to stay in motels or hotels is scheduled to expire Oct. 15. It is projected to cost the Federal Emergency Management Agency as much as \$168 million.

Federal officials are struggling to launch an alternative interim housing program that would give families whose homes are destroyed or uninhabitable a lump sum of \$2,358 in rental assistance, or \$786 a month for three months, with the possibility of a 15-month extension. So far, 330,000 families have signed up for the housing assistance. But if evacuees have to use those stipends to pay for hotel rooms when FEMA stops covering such lodging, the funds will not last long.

Last week, the number of evacuees in hotels increased from 220,000 to more than 400,000 people, in 140,000 rooms. Many have no idea what they will do when the program ends in two weeks.

Ronnie Ashworth, a truck driver from Chalmette, La., east of New Orleans, currently lives at the Baton Rouge Marriott. If no other housing is forthcoming after Oct. 15, "I'll be sleeping in the back of my truck," Ashworth, 60, said. "I have no funds right now."

Red Cross spokeswoman Carrie Martin said, "We're administering the hotel program with the expectation that it ends on October 15th. . . . After that, we'll still have shelters open, but we definitely don't want to move backwards."

Meanwhile, more than 100,000 people remain in about 1,000 shelters operated by the Red Cross, smaller charities and churches, scattered across two dozen states as far-flung as New York and Washington.

The Red Cross has said it will keep its shelters open for as long as necessary, but many are in churches and public buildings that are needed for their primary functions. Hundreds of shelters have closed over the past two weeks, and many of their occupants, the Red Cross said, appear to be moving into hotels, in hopes of benefiting from the hotel program in its final days.

In search of temporary housing immediately after the hurricane, FEMA officials went on a \$1.5 billion spending spree, buying out entire dealerships of recreational vehicles and signing contracts for more than \$500 million with one manufacturer of mobile homes. But the plan to create "cities" of 500 to 600 RVs across the South has run into major logistical and political problems.

In FEMA lots in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, several thousand trailers stand empty, waiting for the agency to navigate land leases, zoning laws, local opposition and policy questions.



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"We have 12,000 mobile homes with no place to put them," said Rosemarie Hunter, a FEMA spokeswoman in Baton Rouge.

To date, only 1,396 trailers in Louisiana house displaced people. About 1,100 are occupied by workers engaged in New Orleans's recovery effort, and 173 house families left homeless by the storm.

Policymakers say that warehousing tens of thousands of people in trailer park communities until New Orleans and other cities are rebuilt could lead to the creation of dysfunctional "FEMAvilles," as residents of past encampments have called them. Democrats go further, warning that they may become known as "Bushvilles," just as Depression-era shantytowns were called "Hoovervilles."

Refugee Council USA, which includes nine U.S. resettlement agencies that have integrated 2.5 million global refugees into the United States since 1975, said storm victims would be better off getting on with their lives -- finding housing, jobs and counseling services in new communities rather than waiting indefinitely for homes to be rebuilt.

FEMA officials agree. Evacuees, said FEMA spokesman Eugene Kinerney, "need to consider long-term housing in areas where there is available rental stock and prospects for employment to take care of other needs, such as food."

But some civic and political leaders worry that the alternative -- resettling storm victims -- will lead many to stay permanently in their host communities, fundamentally changing the nature and politics of Louisiana and possibly beyond.

FEMA initially estimated that the homes of 300,000 families were destroyed by Katrina and that 200,000 of them will need government help with housing but said only time would reveal the true scope of need. The lack of an effective strategy to manage the largest displaced population of Americans in at least 60 years has touched off a furious policy debate.

"The big picture is . . . everyone who has some scheme for how people should live is now living vicariously through the opportunity New Orleans offers" of a blank slate, said Ronald D. Utt, senior researcher at the Heritage Foundation. "All this push and pull is happening, and all of which can be lumped in with some notion of social engineering."

Policy think tanks from the Brookings Institution on the left to Heritage on the right have criticized FEMA for relying on trailers as it traditionally does for hurricane victims, saying Katrina's scale overwhelms that solution. By contrast, they say vouchers provide more choices to individuals, reduce the need for building public housing and take advantage of existing housing stock.

In a joint statement last week, Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) criticized how long it took the Bush administration to implement its voucher program. "It wasn't until nearly one month after the disaster struck that the Bush Administration finally announced it would begin to provide rent payments to families displaced by the storm," as Democrats urged, they said. Under the FEMA housing assistance plan, families that remain eligible can get as much as 18 months of cash assistance for a maximum of \$14,148, but the money would count against a cap of \$26,200 per family that Congress has set for FEMA to give in cash, rental assistance and home repairs.

Even before FEMA announced the program, Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.) pushed a plan through the Senate last month to provide \$3.5 billion in housing vouchers to 350,000 Katrina-displaced families. On Friday, Sarbanes called on Bush to transfer control of housing assistance from FEMA to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"The scope of this disaster calls for changes in how we think about disaster assistance," Sarbanes wrote the White House. "Hundreds of thousands of people may need housing assistance for 18 months or even longer. We cannot rely on FEMA, an emergency response agency, to provide on-going housing assistance to this large number of families," he said, citing HUD's "experience, staff and infrastructure."

Staff writer *Jacqueline L. Salmon* contributed to this report.

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