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FEMA Extends Hotel Program for Evacuees

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Published: December 11, 2005

Under pressure from state and local leaders who say they cannot move thousands of hurricane evacuees from hotels into longer-term housing by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Dec. 15 deadline, officials said Saturday that FEMA would continue paying hotel bills, on a case-by-case basis, for at least three more weeks.

The new program, which FEMA plans to announce Monday, will require evacuees to obtain an authorization number by calling 1-800-621-FEMA and explaining why they still need help. Evacuees who have not registered with FEMA or received rental assistance from the agency or who have spent FEMA checks for items other than housing while staying in a hotel will be eligible.

These individual extensions apply to people staying in an estimated 2,400 rooms in 38 states, where FEMA plans to discontinue blanket payments as of Thursday. FEMA already promised to pick up the tab through Jan. 7 for the 10 states with the most evacuees in their hotels.

"This is really creating a safety net," said Donna Dannells, FEMA's acting deputy director of recovery. "There's never been any intent for someone to be left without the resources to pay for the hotel room or to go and find a place to live."

She said the extension program was partly intended to help FEMA better track the hotel residents.



The hotel program, which has cost the federal government \$325 million so far and at its peak covered 85,000 rooms, has caused much confusion and controversy for FEMA, which originally said last month that it would cut off financing for most rooms by Dec. 1, only to reverse course a week later and set the Dec. 15 and Jan. 7 deadlines.

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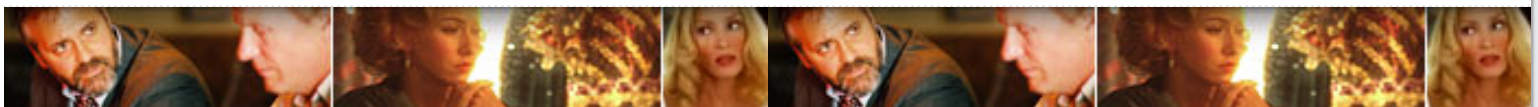
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