

SHELTER AND HOUSING

Long-standing weaknesses and the magnitude of the disaster overwhelmed FEMA's ability to provide emergency shelter and temporary housing

"Scooter: Please see below. The trailer idea is worse than I originally thought. Per the data below, the last batch of the trailers that we are now purchasing will be coming off the production line in approximately 3.5 years."

E-mail from Neil S. Patel, Staff Secretary to the Vice President, to Charles P. Durkin, Personal Aide to the Vice President, (apparently destined for Chief of Staff J. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Jr.), September 9, 2005

Summary

Like food and water, shelter is a basic human need. Hurricane Katrina transformed thousands of people's lives into a battle for survival — and, for some, finding adequate shelter proved at least as difficult as finding something to eat or drink.

Katrina, of course, was a powerful storm that hit vulnerable areas, requiring more than traditional solutions for immediate shelter and, later, temporary housing. Louisiana and Mississippi immediately were faced with thousands and thousands of the suddenly homeless, without the ability to provide emergency shelter or longer-term housing for all of them. Within a month, 44 states had played a role in sheltering the evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

But it is clear state and local governments in the areas most affected by the hurricanes were not adequately prepared. They failed to learn important lessons from the Hurricane Pam exercise, and lacked the necessary information about temporary housing. Shelters of last resort, designed for people to take refuge in the immediate hours before and after landfall (such as the Superdome), were not of sufficient capacity. Instead, the Superdome, itself located in a floodplain, had to bear a burden for



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which it was not prepared. The New Orleans Convention Centre, never planned as a shelter, became one out of sheer necessity and improvisation.

There was no comprehensive database of available shelters, which only complicated relief efforts. There were also delays in getting people out of shelters and into temporary housing. And FEMA's strategy of ordering 200,000 trailers and mobile homes shortly after the storm was blind to the nation's manufacturing capacity of 6,000 units per month.

Housing issues remain a tremendous concern for residents of the Gulf coast affected by Hurricane Katrina. Local elected officials in both Louisiana and Mississippi remain disappointed in FEMA's pace in setting up temporary housing. Debate over how long rental assistance will continue rages on. The question of where to build, or re-build, in the Gulf coast is the subject of great debate, both locally and nationally, as is who will pay for it. However, the long-term housing challenges in the Gulf coast are beyond the scope of the Select Committee's inquiry and are not covered in this report. Our charge was to examine the immediate response, not the recovery. We are certain the longer-term issues will continue to be discussed by others in Congress.

Finding: Relocation plans did not adequately provide for shelter. Housing plans were haphazard and inadequate

Shelter needs overwhelmed state and local governments

Initially, Hurricane Katrina displaced more than a million Gulf coast residents. As in most natural disasters, some evacuees only needed short-term shelter and were able to return home after the immediate crisis passed. However, because of the magnitude of the storm, hundreds of thousands remained displaced — for days, weeks, even months. Many are homeless today.

For example, Louisiana had 563 American Red Cross or state emergency shelters with a peak population of 146,292 in the early days following Hurricane Katrina's landfall.¹ Additionally, Louisiana had 10 special needs shelters that housed 2,480 persons.² In Mississippi, initial damage estimates projected 120,000 individuals needing emergency temporary housing.³ A month after the storm, 44 states and the District of Columbia have been given emergency declarations to cover expenses related to sheltering evacuees forced from their homes by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.⁴

In a catastrophic event like Katrina, many evacuees may be displaced for a longer than normal period of time or may permanently lose their housing. As FEMA and state officials learned from the Hurricane Pam exercise, temporary housing was an area of weakness.⁵ Deputy FCO Scott Wells noted there were several follow-up items from the Hurricane Pam Exercise that state and local governments failed to execute, including developing more detailed concepts and plans on sheltering and temporary housing.⁶ Similarly, Alabama state and local government plans lack information about temporary housing.⁷



FEMA

Finding: State and local governments made inappropriate selections of shelters of last resort. The lack of a regional database of shelters contributed to an inefficient and ineffective evacuation and sheltering process

The evacuation of millions of people prior to Hurricane Katrina's landfall created an urgent need to identify, and direct people to, suitable shelters. Officials had worried about the high number of people who would ignore hurricane evacuation orders in coastal areas.⁸ Indeed, thousands of people in New Orleans did not obey the

mandatory evacuation order. Shelters of last resort — places for persons to be protected from the high winds, storm surge, and heavy rains, but with little or no water or food — were needed for those who did not or could not evacuate the area.

A shelter of last resort is intended to provide the best available survival protection for the duration of the hurricane only.⁹ In Louisiana, emergency operations plans required shelters of last resort to be located outside of the floodplain, or have the ability to locate on floors elevated above flood potential, and have a hurricane wind resistant structure.¹⁰ The Superdome was used as a shelter of last resort even though it was located in a floodplain. In addition, the Superdome roof suffered extensive wind damage, demonstrating that it was not a hurricane wind resistant structure.

Many residents who took refuge in the Superdome found conditions there unbearable. Some tried to leave, only to find themselves trapped by the floodwaters that surrounded the hulking structure. Cleo Fisher, an 86-year-old resident of Bywater, told a local newspaper that he left the dome to try to get some heart medications.¹¹ He didn't

Evacuees tend to go to the most convenient and familiar shelter they can find, even though it may be inadequate.

get far — and, in fact, had to be rescued after he fell into the nearby water — but he did not want to return inside, either.¹²

“It’s worse than being in prison in there,” he said. “They don’t have nothing for me.”

Even some of the police officers and military personnel charged with keeping order inside the dome became frustrated with the lack of organization.

“This plan,” said one police officer, “was no plan.”¹³

Although some local emergency plans call for the identification of local shelters, in a multi-state disaster, a compilation of available shelters in the region may be more appropriate. Government officials did not have a comprehensive database from which to identify suitable and available shelters; therefore, identification of alternate shelter locations was done on an ad hoc basis.¹⁴ Because of the lack of a database of shelters, local, state, and federal officials have had a difficult time identifying the numbers and locations of displaced individuals.¹⁵ This lack of information has complicated the relief effort, and led to the inefficient use of shelter resources.

The lack of a comprehensive means for tracking evacuees has exacerbated difficulties in reuniting family members and in determining accurate counts of people



so as to more accurately provide for their needs.¹⁶ Out of human nature, evacuees tend to go to the most convenient and familiar shelter they can find, even though it may be inadequate. A database could be a helpful resource for planning and providing emergency public information. Similar initiatives have been proposed previously during the Cold War as part of civil defense, such as Crisis Relocation Planning.¹⁷

Finding: There was inappropriate delay in getting people out of shelters and into temporary housing — delays that officials should have foreseen due to manufacturing limitations

Dr. Gavin Smith told a congressional committee that “[w]ithout the rapid provision of temporary and permanent housing solutions, recovery will be slowed or fail to occur in a manner that meets the needs of disaster victims . . .”¹⁸ Although temporary housing efforts in the wake of Katrina have far exceeded any previous effort, individuals remained in shelters for unacceptably long periods of time. Temporary housing efforts have fallen short of meeting demand. Federal, state, and local agencies failed to implement a successful program to shelter and place many evacuees in temporary housing.

FEMA established a Housing Area Command to oversee all temporary housing operations across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.¹⁹ Although this group began identifying available land prior to landfall, temporary housing efforts suffered from delays. A Mississippi recovery official hailed FEMA for “the fastest deployment of temporary housing units to a disaster-stricken area since the program was established,” but also noted the effort has not been good enough.²⁰ Specifically, he noted that operational and long-term planning and inter-organizational coordination remains unrealized, and the current approach is not sufficient to address the needs of communities and states following a catastrophic disaster like Hurricane Katrina.²¹

Due to the massive need for temporary housing, the federal government put together a plan that included a combination of old and new housing strategies, including housing people in trailers and on cruise ships.²²

Housing still falls short of the overwhelming need. There are still delays in getting evacuees into trailers once they are delivered, due to among other things infrastructure, zoning and environmental issues.

Additionally, FEMA used hotels to serve as temporary emergency lodging, utilizing 85,000 rooms nationwide at the program's peak.²³ However, state and local officials complained of poor coordination by FEMA on these temporary housing solutions.²⁴ Immediately following the storm, FEMA contracted with cruise ships to provide transitional housing for hurricane victims close to the disaster area.²⁵ Many evacuees rejected this option, something that perhaps could have been avoided if there had been better coordination beforehand. Many individuals felt they needed to focus on finding jobs and obtaining permanent housing.²⁶

Although FEMA began strategic housing planning before Katrina's landfall, and the private sector mobilized quickly to fill FEMA's manufactured housing demand, many issues also have plagued the relocation into this form of temporary housing. Mississippi Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) William Carwile testified that over 24,000 travel trailers and mobile homes had been occupied in Mississippi.²⁷ FEMA logistics has reported that nine trains a week have been carrying approximately 90 trailers per train into the Gulf region. And, on January 11, 2006, FEMA announced that nearly 62,000 travel trailers and mobile homes were serving as temporary homes for Hurricane Katrina and Rita victims.²⁸ This number nearly tripled the number of units used following all of last year's Florida hurricanes and far outnumbered any housing mission in FEMA's history.²⁹

Despite this commendable effort, housing still falls short of the overwhelming need. There are still delays in getting evacuees into trailers once they are delivered, due to among other things infrastructure, zoning, and environmental issues.³⁰ In Mississippi, the lack of working utilities for private sites and environmental and zoning issues with group sites have delayed the installation of travel trailers and mobile homes.³¹

FEMA's strategy of ordering 200,000 trailers and mobile homes shortly after the storm was blind to the nation's manufacturing capacity of 6,000 units per month. On Friday, September 9, staff to the Vice President and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) officials ratcheted up

concerns about FEMA's decision to rely on trailers and mobile homes to house displaced residents.³² Special Assistant to the Vice President Marie Fishpaw wrote in an e-mail to Patel:

FEMA have (sic) set up arrangements to order 200,000 units of trailers (and mobile homes) and committed up to \$500 million to do so. They want to get 30,000 units (79% of the existing market) soon. FEMA plans to order another 100,000 units. OMB and OVP staff remain skeptical about this strategy. The nation can produce 6,000 units per month. There is probably some capacity for expansion (possibly by about 10%) to meet increased demand, but we don't know how much. That means most of these units won't be available for months. Further, some states, including Louisiana, are balking at the idea of large (25,000 units, as proposed by FEMA) trailer parks. We got all this info from OMB career staff.³³

That message was then forwarded, apparently intended for then Chief of Staff to the Vice President, "I Lewis Libby, Jr.: "Please see below. The trailer idea is worse than I originally thought. Per the data below, the last batch of the trailers that we are now purchasing will be coming off the production line in approximately 3.5 years."³⁴

Finding: FEMA failed to take advantage of HUD's expertise in large-scale housing challenges

FEMA has been working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to meet the challenge of finding and securing sufficient rental assets to meet the huge demands created by mass evacuations. By early



STAFF PHOTO

December 2005, 5,000 displaced families had been placed in federal housing of some sort.³⁵ USDA has offered units from their own inventory, placing 974 families from Louisiana alone.³⁶

Additionally, FEMA has concluded an inter-agency agreement with the VA to rent unused VA housing units to evacuees, and FEMA is pursuing a similar arrangement with Fannie Mae.³⁷ On September 12, 2005, FEMA signed an Interagency Agreement with HUD.³⁸ This agreement identified and made available 5,600 HUD single-family homes.³⁹ Hundreds of disaster victims have made these homes their temporary residences, including 207 families in Texas.⁴⁰

FEMA and HUD have also partnered on the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program (KDHAP), a transitional housing assistance program funded by FEMA and administered by HUD and the network of public housing authorities. Through KDHAP, HUD is providing vouchers to evacuees previously receiving public housing assistance, as well as evacuees who were homeless prior to the hurricane.⁴¹ By December 2005, nearly 15,000 families received rental assistance through KDHAP.⁴²

In contrast, FEMA has used direct payments to evacuees to provide rental assistance to more than 500,000 applicants, totaling more than \$1.2 billion.⁴³ Unfortunately, many displaced households received their initial rental assistance before receiving mailed guidance and did not use this assistance for housing, but instead used it to meet other disaster-related needs.⁴⁴ Although

FEMA has shown flexibility by allowing those individuals to be eligible for additional rental assistance, use of a voucher system similar to the one administered by HUD could have prevented this mistake.

In this case, FEMA failed to take full advantage of HUD's expertise and perspective on large-scale housing challenges, such as the agency's experience with voucher programs. HUD and public housing authorities have the expertise and infrastructure to help non-HUD clients during disasters.

Conclusion

Despite this Herculean effort, state officials feel there has been a lack of coordination within the interagency community causing delay in relocating and housing people.⁴⁵ Although the federal government has shown some ingenuity in coming up with unique solutions such as lodging on cruise ships, and orchestrated the largest mobilization of temporary housing units in history, both of these solutions have proven inadequate.

Carwile, the Mississippi FCO, noted the need for taking a new look at housing solutions:

In Mississippi, while temporary housing has been provided in numbers far exceeding any previous effort, this success is obscured by the overwhelming need and an exceptionally long period of time that people remain in shelters. New methodologies must be examined and implemented to take care of Americans in need of humane housing while in a catastrophic event.⁴⁶

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina was heartbreaking enough for the people who lost their homes. Sadly, however, the days and weeks and months that followed provided little relief. The government plans for their shelter were far from adequate. ■

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- ¹ *Hearing on Housing Options in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Before the Comm. on Financial Services Subcomm. on Housing and Community Opportunity*, 109th Cong. (Jan. 13-14, 2006) at 3 (written testimony of Scott Wells, Federal Coordinating Officer for LA, FEMA) [hereinafter *Jan. 13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing*].
- ² *Id.*
- ³ *Id.* (written testimony of James N. Russo, Federal Coordinating Officer for MS, FEMA) at 3.
- ⁴ FEMA, *2005 Federal Disaster Declarations*, <http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema?year=2005> (last visited Jan.12, 2006).
- ⁵ Interviews by Select Comm. Staff with FEMA and Louisiana State officials in New Orleans, LA (Nov. 3-10, 2005).
- ⁶ Interviews by Select Comm. Staff with FEMA officials in New Orleans, LA (Nov. 3-10, 2005).
- ⁷ Alabama Emergency Management Agency, *State of AL Emergency Operations Plan*, Oct. 1, 2000.
- ⁸ Timothy R. Brown, *Miss. Governor Declares State of Emergency as Katrina Nears*, LEDGER-ENQUIRER, Columbus, GA, Aug. 27, 2005.
- ⁹ State of LA Emergency Operations Plan Supplement 1B, *Southwest LA Hurricane Evacuation and Sheltering Plan*, (July 2000) at VI-1.
- ¹⁰ State of LA Emergency Operations Plan Supplement 1C: *Louisiana Shelter Operations Plan*, (July 2000).
- ¹¹ Gordon Russell, *Refuges Find Dome An Intolerable Refuge*, NEW ORLEANS TIMES-PICAYUNE, Sept. 1, 2005, 5.
- ¹² *Id.*
- ¹³ *Id.*
- ¹⁴ DHS HSOC SPOT Report prepared by Matthew Thompson, NRCC (Aug. 31, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Jan Moller, *La. seeks help compiling evacuee shelter database*, NEW ORLEANS TIMES-PICAYUNE, Sept. 10, 2005, A-7.
- ¹⁶ Shankar Vedantam and Dean Starkman, *Lack of Cohesion Bedevils Recovery*, WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 18, 2005, A01.
- ¹⁷ B. Wayne Blanchard, FEMA, *American Civil Defense 1945-1984: The Evolution of Programs and Policies*, (National Emergency Center Monograph Series Vol. 2, No. 2, 1985) at 19-20.
- ¹⁸ *Jan. 13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing* (written testimony of Dr. Gavin Smith, Director, Office of Recovery and Renewal, Office of Gov. Barbour) at 2.
- ¹⁹ FEMA News Release, *FEMA Contracts to Provide Housing Relief for Displaced Hurricane Victims*, Sept. 8, 2005.
- ²⁰ *Jan. 13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing* (written testimony of Gavin Smith) at 1.
- ²¹ *Id.*
- ²² Rick Weiss, *Victims' Next Homes: Cruise Ships, Trailers*, WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 5, 2005, A15.
- ²³ *Jan. 13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing* (written testimony of Scott Wells) at 4.
- ²⁴ Audio recordings of Hurricane Katrina Conference Calls, LA State Emergency Operations Center (Aug. 26-28, 2005, Sept. 9, 2005).
- ²⁵ FEMA, News Release, *Temporary Housing for Hurricane Katrina Evacuees Includes Cruise Ships*, FEMA Reports, Sept. 4, 2005.
- ²⁶ Shankar Vedantam and Dean Starkman, *Lack of Cohesion Bedevils Recovery*, WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 18, 2005.
- ²⁷ *Hearing on Hurricane Katrina: Preparedness and Response by the State of Mississippi Before Select Comm.*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 7, 2005) at 8 (written testimony of William L. Carwile, III, former Federal Coordinating Officer, Hurricane Katrina Response and Initial Recovery Operations: MS).
- ²⁸ FEMA, *By the Numbers: FEMA Recovery Update for Hurricanes Katrina & Rita*, Jan. 11, 2006.
- ²⁹ *Id.*
- ³⁰ *Interview by Select Comm. Staff with Gary Moore, Director of Logistics, FEMA, in Washington, DC (Jan. 9, 2006)*.
- ³¹ *Jan.13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing* (written testimony of James N. Russo) at 7.
- ³² See Aimee Curl, *Federal-Local Conflicts Keep Victims Out of FEMA Trailers*, FEDERAL TIMES, Jan. 16, 2006.
- ³³ E-mail correspondence from Marie Fishpaw, Special Assistant to the Vice President, to Neil Patel, Staff Secretary to the Vice President, (Sept. 9, 2005) (1:41 p.m.).
- ³⁴ E-mail correspondence from Neil Patel to Charles Durkin, (Sept. 9, 2005) (1:49 p.m.)
- ³⁵ *Hearing on Housing Options in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Before the Comm. on Financial Services Subcomm. on Housing and Community Opportunity*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 8, 2005) at 12 (written testimony of David Garratt, Acting Director, Recovery Division, EMA) [hereinafter *Dec. 8, 2005 Financial Services Comm. Hearing*].
- ³⁶ *Id.* at 12.
- ³⁷ *Id.*
- ³⁸ *Id.* (written testimony of Brian Montgomery, Assistant Secretary for Office of Housing/Federal Housing Commissioner, HUD) at 4.
- ³⁹ *Id.*
- ⁴⁰ *Id.* (written testimony of David Garratt) at 13.
- ⁴¹ *Id.* at 13-14.
- ⁴² *Id.* (written testimony of Brian Montgomery) at 6.
- ⁴³ *Id.* (written testimony of David Garratt) at 6.
- ⁴⁴ *Id.* at 6-7.
- ⁴⁵ *Jan.13-14, 2006 Financial Services Comm. Hearing* (written testimony of Gavin Smith) at 1.
- ⁴⁶ *Hearing on Hurricane Katrina: Perspectives of FEMA's Operational Professionals, Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 109th Cong. (Dec. 8, 2005) at 37 (testimony of William L. Carwile, III, former Federal Coordinating Officer, Hurricane Katrina Response and Initial Recovery Operations: MS).



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"[O]ne of the lessons that we need to learn from this catastrophic event is that we do need to get better about marshaling those assets and moving them around. I will tell you up front, FEMA has a logistics problem, we have a problem understanding all the time. I can point out where our stuff is and I can point out where it's supposed to go to; I can't always tell you that it actually got there."

Michael D. Brown
Former FEMA Director
Select Committee Hearing, September 27, 2005