

King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts ***Disasters: Are you ready?***

Where's My Shelter?

A common question asked by people who are interested in becoming better prepared for disasters is, "Where is the emergency shelter that is closest to where I live?"

So let me give you some basics. The American Red Cross (ARC) does work with governments and other non-profits to pre-identify sites for future use as shelters. However, at the time of the disaster these shelters are not automatically staffed. So if you told family and friends to "Meet me at the shelter." There might not be anyone there and you will find the doors locked.

Shelters are opened to meet specific needs that reveal themselves at the time of a disaster. One of the most common disaster response scenarios we've experience is opening and staffing a shelter, only to not have anyone show up to use it. The reality is that an emergency shelter is an option of last resort. People will choose to stay with relatives, friends or rent a hotel room, rather than sleep on a cot in the middle of a big room with a bunch of other people.

Here is another fact for you. In our recent November 2006 flood event we found that our state's Red Cross assets for establishing and operating shelters were totally tapped out—and it was not that big of a disaster. In our case several shelters were operated by cities in support of the needs in their communities and other communities.

What this means is that if you are concerned about where is the closest shelter is to where you live—you need not look any further than your front door. By that I mean your best shelter option is to prepare your home as your shelter. Stock it with the supplies and special needs that you need for your family. It also is the best option for caring for your family pets. If everyone did this, then the only people needing to move to an ad hoc emergency shelter would be those displaced by the disaster, e.g. flooding or damaged residences.

This planning for your shelter needs is another one of those individual responsibilities that we all need to shoulder.

And, if you are really interested in emergency shelter issues, why not volunteer with the Red Cross and become trained in shelter operations so that you can help others when their lives are disrupted by disaster. In this way you will be adding to our state-wide capability here in Washington State, or in the community wherever you live.