

THE EXPERTS

LAST WORD

Lessons still resonate from Hurricane Katrina

Cities should track housing stock to avoid critical delays in an emergency. **By Denise Kalette**

As Gulf Coast residents uneasily watch for Atlantic storms this hurricane season, housing officials and private developers in Houston keep their own vigil, and recall the catastrophic events of two years ago. What happened in September 2005 tested their endurance and taught critical lessons about disaster readiness.

"Giving everybody a home, quickly," wasn't easy after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf and thousands of evacuees from flood-devastated New Orleans and other cities streamed into Houston, says Guy Rankin, executive director of the Harris County Housing Authority. Not all the 200,000 displaced arrivals stayed, but many did. "The lesson learned here was that it can be done. A major American city can take another major American city, if it has good relationships with private-sector developers and property owners."

With a staff of fewer than 30 people, Rankin found housing for tens of thousands, as evacuees stepped from buses into the Astrodome, a 40-year-old sports stadium. They milled near rows of cots, looking as desolate as any group of war-torn refugees in a distant country.

Here are some lessons learned in that tumultuous time:

► **Neighbor city plan:** Cities need to develop scenarios for housing thousands of survivors from a neighbor city in case of a natural disaster or act of terrorism. Rankin knocked on doors for help, while volunteers from across the country jumped on planes and offered unheralded aid. A delegation from Utah drew up a grid of the Astrodome floor, counted evacuees and reunited many families.

► **Public-private cooperation:** Awareness of available housing stock can save officials critical post-disaster time. For developers, informing officials about housing availability can pay off in the long run. It's cheaper to house an evacuee in a \$600 a

month apartment than in a \$90 per night hotel room.

► **Plan long-term:** A fleeing population may be unable or unwilling to return home. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which funds short-term disaster help, may pass the financial baton to the Department of Housing and Urban Development to transition people off emergency vouchers.

► **Tracking lost documents:** Public and private housing groups may need to help evacuees locate Social Security, financial and health records. Many property managers in Houston helped new arrivals who had lost even driver's licenses.

► **Enlisting church groups.** Faith-based groups may help tenants get food, clothing and other essentials, in partnership with commercial property owners.

Turning on the lights

When evacuees first showed up at his office, Rankin phoned developer Mike Robinson, who had built a new building.

"I said, 'Mike, I have 688 people at my front door. No food, no water. I need you to turn on the electricity. I need you to give them keys— do no credit checks, no background checks.'" Not knowing when or even if he would be paid, Robinson opened his doors.

Until 3 a.m., a staff of three women got keys and turned on lights. "Mike himself goes to Wal-Mart, spends \$35,000 of his own money to buy shower curtains, to buy towels, wash cloths, soap, water, food — the basic necessities," says Rankin.

The housing director drove to a furniture store and told the owner, a stranger, "If you can, deliver 100 beds to these units, 100 kitchenettes, 100 couches." And Rankin told the merchant, too, that



CLOSE QUARTERS: Thousands of evacuees from flooded cities surged into the Houston Astrodome following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Families were reunited and received housing.

he might not get paid. The same night, trucks laden with furniture pulled up at the apartment complex.

Stabilizing seniors

Quickly, the housing authority filled 19 developments. When health officials at the Astrodome said the elderly needed to be stabilized, multifamily owner Brian Potashnik installed seniors in 140 units at Primrose Casa Bella and in the 280 units of his brand new Primrose del Sol.

"It was still under construction. We were still hanging ceiling fans and laying carpet," recalls Carol Dougherty, district manager for Potashnik's Southwest Housing firm. Like many Texans, Potashnik bought supplies for evacuees.

Some 100 multifamily housing owners swarmed at the Astrodome, offering help, says Rankin. He remains so grateful for the community response that to this day, he carries the business card of a volunteering Illinois father and son in his wallet. Without people like them, he says, "It could have been a complete disaster." ■



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