



City Council Oversight Hearing
Emergency Planning and Management Before and After the Storm: Shelter Management
*General Welfare jointly with the Committees on Aging, Health, Mental Health, Developmental
Disability, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse & Disability Services, and Oversight & Investigations*
Tuesday, February 5, 2013

Good afternoon Madame Speaker, Chairs Palma, Lappin, Arroyo, Koppell, Williams and members of the Committees on General Welfare; Aging; Health; Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services; and Oversight and Investigations. I'm Seth Diamond, Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and joining me here today are Glenn Panazzolo, DHS' Assistant Commissioner of Security and Emergency Operations and Robert Van Pelt, Director of Human Services in the Planning and Preparedness Division at the Office of Emergency Management (OEM). Glenn and Robert led the operations of the Unified Operations and Resource Center (UORC) – the command center for the entire Coastal Storm Plan Sheltering System.

We know many of you were deeply involved with Evacuation Centers and Hurricane Shelters that were in your communities. I discussed numerous issues with you frequently, especially in the early days of the storm response and I want to thank you for both bringing issues to my attention and for your great work in bringing in community groups, volunteers and donations to the sites. These efforts greatly helped the evacuees who because of the loss of their home were already under great stress. It is with this spirit of cooperation that I thank you for the opportunity to discuss the City's preparation for sheltering families and individuals displaced as a result of Hurricane Sandy.

Shelter Preparation

The Emergency Sheltering Program in the City's Coastal Storm Plan (CSP) is designed to accommodate up to 600,000 people outside of a flood zone in the event of a weather related emergency. Sheltering so many people would not be possible without designating select Department of Education (DOE) and City University of New York (CUNY) buildings as CSP sheltering facilities. More than 500 facilities have been surveyed and selected as Hurricane Shelters and Evacuation Centers (EC's). During Sandy, the mandatory evacuation of New Yorkers living in Evacuation Zone A at its peak brought approximately 6,800 evacuees to safety in 76 facilities across the city.

Although DHS is the lead agency managing the emergency sheltering effort with coordination from OEM, operating the sheltering system is too large a task for any single agency to accomplish alone. As part of the CSP, 18 different city agencies are tasked with allocating staff to operate EC's and Hurricane Shelters. Those staff are identified and designated to report pre-storm through OEM's automated messaging system, which includes phone calls, texts and emails

to alert and assign them to shelter. Thanks to the efforts and determination of city workers, 150,000 city staff have been recruited from agencies and added to OEM's CSP StormStaff database. Contact information for all 150,000 registered city shelter staff is housed by OEM in a web-based system that allows the City to activate, notify and deploy shelter staff.

The importance of training in advance for this critical mission cannot be understated. OEM, together with DHS and CUNY, have developed a robust training program with a variety of courses, both online and classroom training, for city employees designated as shelter staff. The CSP Operators' Course is a full-day training developed by CUNY and taught by DCAS instructors which outline the essential roles that City employees may play if called to work within the CSP sheltering system. Shelter operators serve in a variety of roles as managers and deputy managers of EC's and Hurricane Shelters. City staff also participate in a two-hour online course titled, "Hurricane Sheltering Orientation for Specialists," to review key functions of an EC and Hurricane Shelter. The interactive electronic learning program identifies the activities required by key staff positions in the facilities and uses scenario-based problem solving challenges to teach basic sheltering objectives. Lastly, Just-In-Time (JIT) training is an on-the-spot training which is available at EC's during an emergency for those city employees who have received their assignments at a shelter. Since 2007, more than 34,000 employees have taken courses in this coastal storm training suite.

Logistics

To supply these shelters, the Emergency Supply Stockpile, which consists of 5,700 pallets of medical supplies, personal care items, infant supplies, cots, blankets, food, water and pet supplies, is designed to support the basic needs of thousands of people sheltering in the system. Supplies can be deployed in 48 hours to distribution points throughout New York City.

Managing Evacuation Shelters

On October 25, 2012 at 8:00 AM, four days prior to Sandy's arrival, the City activated the Coastal Storm Sheltering Plan for a Zone A evacuation, which anticipates sheltering up to nearly 71,000 people from low lying areas.

During the CSP activation, the UORC was the centralized command and control unit responsible for managing the City's Emergency Sheltering System. The UORC is a multi-agency operation led by DHS and staffed with key personnel from various City entities including OEM, DOE, CUNY, DCAS, HRA, DOHMH, HHC, NYCHA and NYPD's School safety unit as well as additional support from NYC's Animal Planning Task Force (APTF), the American Red Cross (ARC), Federal Management Agency (FEMA) and other non-governmental organizations. In managing the sheltering system, the UORC monitors and provides assistance to all CSP facilities and operations. UORC staff collects and summarizes sheltering information and reports situational activities to the Emergency Operation Center (EOC) at OEM headquarters in downtown Brooklyn. Perhaps most importantly, the UORC provides routine and emergency logistical coordination to support our sheltering facilities and the evacuees they serve.

On Saturday morning, October 27th, OEM activated the UORC to coordinate the mobilization, staffing, deployment of resources to, and opening of the Emergency Shelter System. At 9:00 AM the following morning, the Emergency Shelter System was open and available to the public where city staff welcomed our first evacuees.

The Emergency Shelter System is comprised of several different types of shelters including Evacuation Centers, Hurricane Shelters and Special Medical Needs Shelters.

The EC is the primary entry point for evacuees seeking public shelter. In the event of any emergency such as Sandy, the location for all ECs are publicized on NYC.gov as well as OEM and DHS websites, through 311, and via NotifyNYC so that evacuees can make emergency plans for their household. The Evacuation Center locations are also published in OEM's "Ready New York" materials. Located close to public transportation and having capacity to receive and transport continuous streams of evacuees, ECs are the hubs of the Emergency Shelter System. At the EC, staff briefly assesses evacuees for any medical needs or other special requirements before directing them to the appropriate sheltering facility, providing transportation in the event the shelter is not co-located with the EC.

Hurricane Shelters are safe facilities out of the evacuation zones that offer emergency shelter and meet basic needs to preserve the health and safety of evacuees during a coastal storm. Similar to the efforts at EC's, staff at these shelters provide necessities such as food and water, cots and blankets, health and mental health support and the ability to shelter pets until the storm passes. Evacuees requiring a higher level of medical care are sent to a Special Medical Needs Shelter (SMNS) or other medical facility as needed.

A Special Medical Needs Shelter is a temporary emergency facility capable of providing care to residents whose medical condition exceeds the capabilities of an EC or Hurricane Shelter, but is not severe enough to require hospitalization. An SMNS provides clinical medical professionals and administrative staff from the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC), mental health staff from DOHMH, medical volunteers from the City's Medical Reserve Corps and is assisted by federal Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMAT). The Healthcare Evacuation Center, known as the HEC which you learned about in a prior Council hearing, is staffed by NYSDOH, HHC, DOHMH and other health and medical agencies to coordinate Healthcare Evacuation. The HEC, together with the ECs were the primary referral source to SMNS facilities.

In the days after the storm, the UORC began public shelter consolidation efforts as evacuees returned to their homes and/or health care facilities. Part of the consolidation included closing some evacuation sites that were located in DOE facilities so that the City could prepare for public schools to resume. In the interim, DHS' Facility Management Division assessed multiple facilities to use as additional emergency shelters, including City and State owned buildings as well as privately owned structures.

Through our current network of service providers, DHS solicited our community-based partners to assist in transitioning evacuees out of schools and to new shelter facilities. These facilities were quickly staffed to provide on the ground support and case management services to

evacuees. The commitment and prompt response to the city's need from providers like BASICS/Acacia, BRC, HELP USA, HousingBridge, Narco Freedom, Project Hospitality, Project Renewal, the Salvation Army, Samaritan Village, and WIN is a true testament to their compassion to care for those in need and DHS is proud to be their partner.

I also want to thank our federal partners. We worked closely with staff from FEMA to send teams to register shelter evacuees for FEMA benefits. As part of the nationwide response, FEMA also deployed the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) who were remarkable in assisting with our sheltering efforts. Also, Ann Oliva, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, dispatched staff from around the country to help in the evacuation shelters and affected disaster areas. We were pleased to work with HUD and Community Solutions, led by Roseanne Haggerty, to design a housing needs assessment of shelter evacuees.

Last, but certainly not least, I must thank the employees of DHS, many of whom worked 12-hour shifts, day after day, at UORC, and at evacuation sites to assist Hurricane evacuees. Agency staff also worked tirelessly to evacuate certain DHS shelters in advance of the storm, transfer clients elsewhere and ensure that repairs were made quickly so that clients could return to their assigned shelter. While all of this was going on, DHS employees continued to ensure that all eligible homeless families and individuals received temporary emergency housing in the DHS shelter system. As their commissioner, I am extremely proud of their hard work on behalf of New Yorkers in need.

Transition from Evacuation Shelters to City Hotels

On November 5th, Mayor Bloomberg appointed Brad Gair as Director of the Office of Housing Recovery. One of the first initiatives Housing Recovery developed was the City Hotel Program, an extension of the emergency Evacuation Shelter System. For those evacuees who remained in emergency shelters but were unable to return to their homes, the City entered into agreements with hotels to provide alternative stable, short-term evacuation sheltering. The Office of Housing Recovery created the Hotel Operations Desk, staffed with personnel from HPD, DHS and the Mayor's Office to generate hotel options and reservations for families and individuals entering the City Hotel system. DHS began to transport evacuees from evacuation shelters to hotels on November 12th.

Additionally, those displaced by the storm were counseled by Homebase staff at Restoration Centers. Providers, including the Archdiocese of New York, BronxWorks, CAMBA, Catholic Charities of Queens, HELP USA, Palladia and Ridgewood Bushwick all helped to provide information on temporary housing options and, when available, immediate hotel or apartment placements. Homebase continues to be present in Restoration Centers across the city.

Referrals to City Hotels also came in as a result of the National Guard's door-to-door operations and continued to come in from providers at public evacuation shelters until the UORC operation was deactivated on November 19th.

The provision of services in the City Hotel Program was originally administered through the Red Cross. Later, DHS began to work with our community based partners to provide services to evacuees in hotels. BASICS, BRC, Project Hospitality, Samaritan Village Inc., and SCO Family Services continue to provide services to approximately 800 displaced households across 50 different locations. These organizations are providing case management services and connecting evacuees to city or federal benefits they may be eligible for. The providers are helping those displaced with housing plans including collaborating with FEMA to ensure that all evacuees have registered with programs for which they may be eligible. Providers are also working with the ARC to ensure that evacuees in City Hotels have access to debit cards to purchase food.

The Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, in partnership with HRA and Single Stop USA, also conducted a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach and screening at City Hotels beginning Monday November 19th. Evacuees were informed that they might be eligible to receive SNAP benefits and that there would be representatives available to enroll them on site while they were staying at their Hotel. Representatives offered onsite eligibility screening and guidance on necessary documentation for a complete application. We are also currently partnering with Legal Services NYC to connect hotel evacuees to a dedicated legal advocacy hotline, thanks to the generous support of the Robin Hood Foundation.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, we've seen everyday New Yorkers rise to the occasion and help their fellow neighbors. During Sandy we saw the remarkable strength of community - in Brooklyn where Red Hook's neighbors in Carroll Gardens and Park Slope organized food and clothing drives; in Queens where a brave young man on a surfboard rescued his Rockaway neighbors from the storm's surge; in Manhattan where community groups walked up high-rises to check on neighbors while one third of the island remained dark; and in Staten Island neighborhoods like Tottenville, South and Midland Beach where strangers found respite at a Jesuit retreat named Mount Manresa whose mission in part, is to accept the challenge to show there can be a community among human beings which is based on sharing. The successes of our sheltering mission during Hurricane Sandy are attributable to the capable and courageous city staff and heroic service providers who were our greatest asset in this emergency and the community members who came together to offer the simplest of virtues, generosity.