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Texas Shelters Open Doors Wider During Storm

By Suzanne Batchelor, WeNews Correspondent

AUSTIN, Texas (WOMENSENEWS) – Domestic violence shelters in Texas, comfortable with crisis, faced hurricanes Katrina and Rita with improvised safety plans. Most say they managed to evacuate all their residents to neighboring shelters while safeguarding their identities. Despite the continuing chaos, most of the evacuees have been accounted for and shelter managers believe the others are safe.

The premium on safeguarding residents' lives can hinder efforts to evacuate them, as advocates in areas affected by the hurricanes discovered in recent days and weeks.

Residents can't join the exodus to Red Cross or municipal disaster shelters, because that's where their abusers may also head. Instead, shelters devise their own emergency evacuation plans to preserve residents' safety and anonymity, relying on the ready generosity of shelters in other cities.

In this story, Women's eNews has removed certain location names and other identifiers to preserve evacuating women's safety, by request of the shelters.

Ten days before Hurricane Rita made landfall, on Wednesday, Sept. 14, staff members at shelters and at the Austin-based Texas Council on Family Violence began networking to connect coastal residents with available beds, vans, cars, buses, extra food, diapers and other necessities.

As Texas braced for Rita, a hurricane that threatened to be as powerful as Katrina, over 60 family violence shelters kept in constant touch online and by phone to arrange transportation and find room for women and children evacuating 15 coastal shelters that were being closed.

"Most shelters operate pretty close to full," said Laura Wolf, policy director for the Austin-based council, which operates a secure group e-mail for 82 Texas shelters. Once informed of the pending coastal evacuation, inland Texas shelters jumped into action.

Seizing the Initiative

Several Texas shelter directors said that viewing the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama energized them to seize the initiative in evacuating their residents as soon as Rita approached.

Galveston Island shelter residents were some of the first to evacuate for safer parts of the state after the city's mayor urged everyone to leave as soon as possible, ahead of mandatory evacuation orders.

Reports of lost children separated from their families during Katrina prompted Texas shelters to prepare homemade, laminated identification cards for evacuated children to wear, several shelter staff said, aiding reunion of any separated children during Rita.

"We've been able to contact our sister agencies in Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida and talk to them about protocol and things that would have made a difference had they known, and use those sad experiences to our benefit," said Texas Council executive director Sheryl Cates. "Within four weeks, we've had to learn a lot."

Practical advice from the Florida shelter coalition included reminders to "make sure we have one list of all the shelter executive directors' cell phone numbers; track the destination of client evacuees at one central location; have a flow chart or list ready for shelter evacuation," said Wolf.

"It's fantastic! The shelter movement is absolutely connected and we feel strongly we're sisters in responding to safety needs," Julia Spann, executive director of Austin's SafePlace shelter, told Women's eNews.

Paige Flink, director of the Dallas-based Family Place, concurred.

"I saw a lot of cooperation between the shelters and the people, saying, 'If you can get this far, we'll send a van and get them.' Everyone was trying to help," she said.

A Second Influx

For many shelters, the new influx followed right behind the women who had just come and gone with Katrina.

A mid-state shelter took in 13 women and 7 children from the Texas coast, said Ron Crozier, the shelter's community relations director. The evacuees arrived early, two days following the council's first e-mail alert. Two residents evacuated in their own cars; shelter staff drove the other 11 to safety and then returned to the coast in time to evacuate with their own families.

Shelters contacted local county and city emergency management authorities, who often sent buses for the exclusive use of shelter evacuees, Cates said. Others left in shelter vans or, safety permitting, traveled on Greyhound buses.

At least one staff member accompanied evacuating residents, for their safety, to continue their services, and to ensure that the receiving shelter would not be overburdened, said Maria Jose Angelelli of the Texas Council.

Shelter staff in San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and many mid-size cities were already weary following days or weeks of providing aid at local public shelters for Katrina evacuees, the council said. But they squeezed in extra beds in already crowded facilities for residents leaving first the Gulf Coast, then east Texas communities ahead of Rita.

While the logistics of evacuating residents during a disaster are unusual, the work of accommodating displaced and traumatized women and children is routine for domestic-violence shelters.

“We’re accustomed to crisis, with people coming to us with nothing,” said Cates. “So we’re in a position to manage that.”

Smooth Going Before Shift

Evacuation procedures were going fairly smoothly, many shelter directors say, until Hurricane Rita shifted east, and major highways were clogged by exiting traffic.

“Eleven residents left east Texas Wednesday and they’re not there yet,” a concerned Cates said the day before Rita hit. “We never anticipated this kind of jam in transportation.”

What is normally a three-hour drive from Houston to Austin began to take 16 hours or more in the countdown to the storm. Cars overheated and ran out of gas.

“There were people driving 21 hours without restrooms. They blocked off the exit ramps,” Angelelli said. “If you pulled off the road into the grass, it was very, very hard to get back in. Cell phones were working on and off; staff had to evacuate and leave their families behind. This was all really stressful.”

The day before the storm hit, evacuees had stopped showing up at their new havens.

“We think people are trapped on highways and a lot of people don’t have cell phones,” said Spann that afternoon.

Where travel was heaviest, gasoline stations ran empty.

“In Nacogdoches, there’s no gas within 200 miles and no water to buy,” said Cates during the evacuation, referring to an east Texas shelter in the storm’s final path. “So Nacogdoches residents are not going to get on the road and leave, and they have Katrina people with them.”

Yesterday, Angelelli said, she was still waiting to hear from the Beaumont and Nacogdoches shelters. Overloaded phone networks and power outages were likely to blame for the silence from these still-flooded regions; otherwise, the shelter evacuation went smoothly, she said. In the midst of the chaos, one survivor gave birth at a hospital on her evacuation route.

Throughout the state, weary but determined staff, women and children are packing up for their return journey. Unlike other disaster survivors, though, their migration will be hidden by the domestic violence network that shields them.

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For more information:

Health Workers Fly to Aid Female Katrina Survivors:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2443>

Texas Council on Family Violence: <http://www.tcfv.org>

National Domestic Violence Hotline at <http://www.ndvh.org> 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) and 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

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