

50,000 Katrina evacuees without permanent housing

FEMA to stop paying hotel bills

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More than 50,000 people are still living in hotel rooms three months since the devastating consequences of Hurricane Katrina displaced as many as one million people. The Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is currently funding hotel stays for the evacuees who have not been able to find housing. After the next round of deadlines, FEMA will no longer pay the hotel bills.

After coming under criticism, FEMA announced a two-week extension of the deadline for termination of FEMA's hotel program for evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Rather than terminating hotel stays on December 1, the extension gives evacuees until December 15. In the 10 states with the highest concentration of evacuees, stays will be extended through January 7, 2006.

The 10 states with the largest concentration of families—92 percent of the total—are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee and Texas. In addition, there are 29 states lodging less than 100 families each. For example, New York is hosting 273 households, which means roughly 12 families a day need to be placed in what is now referred to as “temporary permanent” housing by December 15.

FEMA is requiring the 10 states receiving further extensions up to January 7 to outline plans and timelines for completing the placement of evacuee households into qualified temporary housing. FEMA will also require those states to submit periodic status reports outlining their progress in meeting requirements for extensions of the hotel program beyond December 15.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a memorandum issued to FEMA staff acknowledges that “available permanent housing is scarce in Louisiana and Mississippi,” adding that “local FEMA officials in these states may approve short-term extensions of hotel/motel assistance of up to 14 days each. No extensions will be allowed beyond January 7. States and localities that pay for hotel rooms beyond these dates will not be reimbursed.”

Secondly, the memorandum directs, “Deny reimbursements to state and local governments for new or extended apartment leases signed after November 30, 2005 on behalf Katrina evacuees. In addition, leases signed by state and local governments before December 1 ... cannot be for longer than three months although longer terms may be approved on a case by case basis if it is

determined that three-month leases are unavailable.”

And it further indicates, “End all reimbursements to state and local governments for rental assistance for Katrina victims as of March 1, 2006, even if governments are obliged to make payments under leases for a longer period.”

The prospects for finding affordable and safe housing are grim. For families staying in hotels or motels in Louisiana and Mississippi there are few units available near the disaster area, which may force many families to move further away. In cities such as Baton Rouge and Houston, the local rental market pricing has increased. FEMA rental assistance, which is capped based on rental costs prior to the hurricane, may be insufficient to secure an apartment in those cities today. In addition, there are reports from some areas that landlords are refusing to sign three-month leases.

For many who have been uprooted—separated from their communities, family and friends—the prospect of finding a permanent job and permanent housing is overwhelming.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently carried reports on the plight of some of the evacuees. Mike Washington, a New Orleans evacuee, lost his home and printing shop. He is living in an apartment in Smyrna, Georgia with his wife and five-year-old son, sleeping on mattresses on the floor. They do not even have a table for his son to do homework. He said he has been offered a job at \$10 an hour for 30 hours a week, but said his time was better spent working with insurance companies, applying for loans and searching out a new location for his business in metro Atlanta.

Janice Ramsey is still looking for a job, having been on 10 job interviews. A former advertising worker for a Biloxi, Mississippi casino, she thinks interviewers worry she will stay on the job only until she can return home. But she says she plans to stay in Georgia. She has been living with her four children in a FEMA-funded room at a Days Inn in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* went to the Southfield Hotel (formerly the Ramada Inn) in Southfield, Michigan, which is still housing 84 people, including 28 children. Wallace Wells, a spokesperson for the hotel and director of “Operation Open Arms,” has successfully raised funding from corporations and local charities to aid the evacuees. “We will not put anyone out—no matter what the deadline—until we have properly placed everyone,” he said. So far, more than 200 people have been placed in jobs and housing in the area. An Internet cafe

has been established in the hotel to assist those looking for jobs.

Wells explained that for the most part the Internet and phone lines are the only access the evacuees have to FEMA. “I would say that, perhaps, a FEMA representative has come to this hotel at the most once or twice. There is no one assigned to the people here. They are pretty much on their own when it comes to FEMA. The only agencies that have regular contact with us are the Red Cross and the United Way.”

In the beginning, some of the politicians showed up—Michigan’s two senators, Democrats Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, and Barbara Lawrence, the mayor of Southfield. Since the media attention has died down, visits from the politicians have ended.

Wells explained, “There may be some in the community who say, ‘Well, they’ve had 75 days to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, so why are they still here?’ It’s not that easy. People who have come here have not come from opulent homes. In addition to financial assistance, they are in need of education, computer skills, counseling.”

A front-page lead article by Ron French in Monday’s *Detroit News*—“Evacuees leave, but U.S. pays: Taxpayers pick up the tab for vacant rooms”—is an attempt to discredit the Southfield Hotel and win support for the cutoff of Katrina evacuees. The piece reflects the contempt and indifference towards the hurricane victims within wide layers of the ruling elite.

The article accuses the hotel of mismanagement, implying it is fraudulently billing FEMA for vacated rooms. French claims the *Detroit News* and the hotel staff were unable to locate some people on a list, and thus concludes the hotel is overcharging.

French visited the Southfield Hotel the day before *World Socialist Web Site* reporters came to interview evacuees. Wallace Wells said he was anticipating the charges in the *Detroit* newspaper after French’s visit. Wells explained that it was difficult to keep track of everyone while also maintaining the privacy of the evacuees. He said some had returned briefly to their homes in Louisiana or Mississippi, but had come back; others visited family members in the Detroit area for a few days.

French’s article serves the despicable role of “tipping off” the authorities and hastening the cutoff of FEMA hotel funding. In the guise of investigative reporting, the *News* is basically saying: enough is enough. The Southfield Hotel is accused of corruption in its efforts to assist the Katrina evacuees, while private contractors—many of them Bush cronies—are profiting off of the disaster with lucrative contracts in the Gulf Coast rebuilding effort.

By contrast, the evacuees staying at the Southfield Hotel are representative of the vast majority of Katrina’s victims. Part of the working poor prior to the disaster, they are now living on the edge, subsidized by emergency hotel and food vouchers.

Fabian Richardson and his 13-year-old daughter have been at the hotel in Southfield since September 1. In New Orleans he was employed on and off as an electrician, but he has not been able to find a job yet. “I have been pretty much consumed with trying to deal with basic issues everyday, such as getting transportation,” he said.

Mr. Richardson does not plan on going back to New Orleans: “I heard of people going back to their homes and getting sick, having to be hospitalized. The place is toxic, full of mold. It’s not safe. I

was told by FEMA that if I went back I could live in a trailer park, but that’s not good for a 13-year-old girl. I am going to stay in Michigan and try to make it here.”

Carl Benson was a maintenance worker in Biloxi, Mississippi. “We went through a crisis and it’s still with us,” he said. “It’s almost changing into another year and we are still in a crisis. I feel like the clock is running out. I’m single, so it’s not quite as bad for me as it is for a family.”

After the hurricane hit, he traveled two-and-a-half days on a bus. He told the WSWs, “I didn’t have a clue where I was going. My brother and sister live in Michigan, that’s all I knew. I have never been here before, never saw snow before and certainly have never been in such cold weather. The job situation is up in the air. I spend most of the day making phone calls.

“Not in a million years did I think I would find myself in this situation. I’m not pointing fingers, but I want to be treated fairly, all of us do. Jobs, medical care, housing and education for the children—these are the things that need attention.”

The Southfield Hotel has set up play rooms for the children. Agreements have been worked out with local school districts and school buses arrive daily at the hotel to pick up the children. Rhonda Aubrey—with four children ages 5, 7, 13 and 15—says she is thankful, but this is not home. She drove to Michigan from Lafayette, Louisiana in Vermillion Parrish, where she was a cook at a truck stop. Shortly after she arrived in Michigan she was taken to the hospital for a gall bladder operation. She recently received a huge hospital bill, but is hoping the charges will be covered.

“I’m trying to get back,” Rhonda said. “My mama wants us to come back. She herself had to move due to Hurricane Rita. I was told by FEMA that my rent would be taken care of for 12 months if I go back. I hope that is true. FEMA denied my claim to cover my personal property that was lost. We have nothing. There are lots of hungry and homeless people in this country and yet the government is spending billions on the war in Iraq.”



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