

Lessons Learned from Hurricane Laura Non-Congregate Sheltering

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With summer fast approaching and bringing with it yet another active hurricane season in the South and fire season in the West, some communities may find themselves facing evacuation and needing to seek shelter all while the COVID-19 pandemic drags on and continues to present an ongoing challenge. In 2020, emergency managers and public health staff had to adapt their emergency plans in order to find ways to safely shelter residents while limiting the risk of COVID-19 transmission. With the risk for congregate shelters to act as potential super-spreader events, and the near impossibility of meeting increased distancing requirements within the limitations of congregate sites, non-congregate sheltering was utilized by some state governments to shelter large numbers of evacuees post-disaster. In the case of Hurricane Laura, which dealt a devastating blow to Southwest Louisiana, thousands of residents were evacuated and offered the option to seek shelter in hotels. The majority of the state funded hotel shelters utilized were in New Orleans, over three hours from the impacted area, with close to 12,000 evacuees being sheltered in these hotels in the aftermath of the hurricane.

Working for the City of New Orleans at the time, I was able to witness firsthand how non-congregate sheltering differed in terms of the evacuee's experience and their ability to access recovery services. It is important to share these observations and lessons learned, so that Emergency Managers and their partners can ensure that evacuees and those utilizing non-congregate shelters can get the support they need and be able to access services equal to what would be offered to them in a congregate shelter. The 2021 hurricane and fire seasons present an opportunity to learn from the successes, and limitations, of the models that were quickly implemented in 2020 in order to meet an emerging need.

At a quick glance, one may assume that sheltering evacuees in hotels may be a more pleasant experience, as it offers far more privacy, as well as quieter and more comfortable sleeping arrangements, instead of crowded conditions and cots in a large auditorium, gymnasium or stadium. While this may be true, and there are real benefits from the added privacy, including safety, there needs to be additional considerations taken by federal, state, and local emergency management when it comes to ensuring that hotel shelter residents are still offered the same access to essential relief and recovery services.

Plan to Support Seniors & Special Medical Needs in Non-Congregate Setting

One of the challenges with non-congregate sheltering is that it can be difficult to have good visibility on the needs and issues faced by shelter residents. With thousands of individuals and families being in separate hotel rooms, it is not always easy to know what needs are going unmet and folks can more easily fall through the cracks. Furthermore, the hotel environment limits the ability to readily access all shelter residents in order to share information, resources, and identify needs. This is especially true when it comes to seniors and those with special medical needs, who may not be able to make it down from their hotel room to the main floor to pick up meals for themselves, or who may be struggling with mobility and emergency medical issues and cannot alert hotel or shelter staff easily for assistance. This can be addressed by having a good intake process when evacuees are entering the hotel shelter to ascertain who is in need of more assistance, followed by having sufficient staffing to be able to assign teams to check on vulnerable residents, deliver meals to those in need, and ensure they are able to have medications, clothing and other necessities picked up and brought to them. Consider that mobility devices (such as wheelchairs, canes, and walkers) may be required by shelter residents and arrangements should be made to have those on hand and delivered to those in need. It is important for States to quickly enact contracts for personal care assistants to support medically vulnerable and mobility limited shelterees, and for any sheltering non-profit that may be assisting, such as the Red Cross, to plan to have adequate staffing and supplies to support more vulnerable and isolated residents.

Providing On-site Essential Supplies & Services

Another challenge the City of New Orleans encountered with non-congregate sheltering was the reticence of some hotel managers to allow for resource centers to be located onsite at the hotel. Many of the evacuees from Hurricane Laura arrived with only the clothes on their back, missing medication, mobility devices, hygiene kits, strollers, diapers, and more. In a congregate shelter, the agency or organization managing the shelter would normally provide shelterees with hygiene kits, baby formula, diapers, and other important essentials, as well as have the ability to bring in key service providers to support evacuees access recovery resources and manage stress and trauma as needs arose. The City of New Orleans sought to set up resource fairs at several of the major sheltering hotels, so that evacuees with families, and those with mobility issues would have easy access to essential supplies to meet their basic needs. However, that was not allowed by some of the hotels, resulting in the need for the City to open up and staff a larger Hurricane Laura Family Resource Center, and provide shuttle services from the hotels to the resource center. While we were able to provide extensive donations to support evacuees, as well as access to

prescription services and recovery support, it was difficult for some evacuees to access the external resource center, especially those who lacked childcare and had small children, the elderly, those with mobility issues, and evacuees with health issues.

It is important for governments making contracts with hotels to ensure that the contracts include a provision to allow the use of their conference rooms or ballrooms for essential supplies, services and recovery fairs as this is critical to meeting the needs of the shelterees. Similarly, it is also important for shelter non-profit partners to provide the same basic supplies in a non-congregate shelter as they would in a congregate shelter, and to utilize a reception area or room at the hotel to have critical supplies on hand, including formula, diapers, hygiene kits, and more. This can be addressed in the MOUs and agreements in place for hurricane or fire season. Contracts made with sheltering hotels and partner agencies should be clear in what supplies and services they will offer shelterees. Hotels agreeing to shelter evacuees should have an understanding of what to expect from city and state emergency management, and who to reach out to in the event of incidents. While one would expect a hotel to provide shampoo, soap, toilet paper, and some basic hygiene items, in some cases evacuees were only given one set of toiletries for their entire stay. Making clear agreements allowing evacuees the same frequency of cleaning services as other guests is also key, as in some situations, evacuee rooms were cleaned at lengthy intervals necessitating evacuees to reach out to the community for donated cleaning products. A good number of the hotels did not provide laundry services, necessitating the State to operate a separate laundry contract to assist evacuees with limited clothing.

Finally, it is critical to work with partner agencies to provide support to families in terms of child care and children's activities, both to support the wellbeing of the children, and to give parents time to rest and seek recovery resources. Planning to provide shuttle services to pharmacies and other key locations, transportation vouchers for public transit, and coupons to ride share services for shelter residents will be especially important for their well-being depending on the location of the hotel.

Communicate Effectively with Shelter Residents

It is important to make a plan for how to share important emergency messages and information on recovery resources with residents in non-congregate shelters. Evacuees may arrive without cell phones, chargers, or computers to assist them in receiving communications, alerts, or looking up recovery updates and information. In congregate sheltering, announcements can be made to assembled shelterees, screens and bulletin boards can also be used. With residents distributed in multiple hotels, local or state emergency management must work with hotels and responding agencies like the Red Cross to do the same. For Hurricane Laura shelterees, some hotels allowed the use of their electronic message screens to post announcements. A kiosk or resource desk staffed by shelter staff or volunteers can be used to refer residents to resources, answer questions, and share important messages. Shelter residents can be encouraged to sign up for the City or State emergency alert system to receive messages. Flyers and information can also be given out when residents pick up their meals. Notes can be left under hotel room doors. It may also be possible for some hotels to work with emergency management and their partners to send recorded messages about meal times, shuttles, and resource fairs via their room phone system.

Access to Recovery Resources

When residents are sheltered in hotels far away from their homes, they are at a disadvantage for accessing key recovery support and services. Hurricane Laura evacuees in New Orleans were at least 3-4hrs from their communities, many without their own transportation or local housing that would have allowed them to go back and forth to check on their homes and start cleanup and repairs. They were not present to request clean-up and rebuilding support through Crisis Clean Up within the first several weeks of the disaster, or access the support offered by responding non-profit disaster organizations, many of whom arrived in the disaster zone after the storm and left before a good number of these evacuees were able to return home. While this can also be true of those in congregate shelters, it is far easier for shelter residents in a non-congregate setting to be overlooked. It is also more difficult for responding agencies to share their services with them as they are dispersed across multiple hotels. The need to provide timely information to shelter residents regarding what recovery resources are being offered, as well as the means to access them, both where they are sheltered and back home, is critical. This can be as simple as sharing the Crisis Clean Up hotline number with hotel shelter residents so they can reach out for damage assistance and get in the queue to receive possible support from responding non-profits regardless of their location. This can also include working with responding non-profits via VOAD structures to make sure they are aware of the number of shelter residents in non-congregate shelters, and create ways for them to engage and support those efforts and evacuees.

Finally, while Disaster Recovery Centers were set up quickly in the storm-impacted communities by FEMA, it took much longer for any to be set up in New Orleans to assist the 12,000 evacuees being sheltered in the city. With many evacuees lacking computer access or cell phones to fill out online forms, non-congregate shelter residents

would have greatly benefited from quicker support in accessing and navigating emergency assistance where they were being primarily sheltered. It is also important to note that when FEMA did set up in New Orleans, it originally located staff at a few of the major shelter hotels, which unfortunately were not always accessible to residents being sheltered at other hotels due to heightened security measures in place by some hotel management restricting entry to non-guests. Again, an important reminder of the need for clear agreements to be in place with hotels participating in non-congregate shelter operations. If a limited number of hotels are being used for sheltering, it could work to have FEMA set up assistance centers at individual hotels for shelter residents. However if numerous hotels are being utilized, it is better to have a central disaster recovery center that is accessible to entry by all shelterees, with timely notification of its opening and adequate shuttle service provided.

Key Takeaways

It is important to remember that non-congregate shelters do not mean that evacuees are able to meet their own needs, or that some additional comforts make up for the provision of essential supplies and services. A few things to keep in mind going forward:

- In the contracts with participating hotels, make sure agreements are included for the use of their space for on-site resource fairs and donations.
- Plan to provide shelterees with the same essential supplies and services you would if they were in a congregate shelter, with particular focus on hygiene kits, medical supplies, formula, diapers, clothing, mobility equipment, and children supplies.
- Work with non-profit partners and service providers to address unmet needs for hotel shelter residents. Share their information flyers at booths at the hotel to relay important information about support for shelter residents. Have non-profit partners and service providers participate in accessible donation and service fairs for the shelter residents.
- Find effective ways to share that information with hotel shelterees through a variety of communication modalities.
- Ensure there is a good process at the hotels in order to identify residents in need, and have a team in place to check on and support residents with medical and mobility issues.
- Work to offer accessible transportation options to evacuees so they can access community resources and entertainment.
- Advocate for shelterees to receive the same access to recovery services and federal assistance in navigating emergency assistance applications as those in congregate shelter settings.

With a better understanding of some of the challenges in non-congregate sheltering, changes can be made to better meet the needs of evacuees and assist them in their post-disaster recovery.