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Storm Bared a Lack of Options for the Homeless in New York

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Even before Hurricane Sandy, New York was sheltering more homeless people than any city in the United States: a record 47,000 women, men and children, in a system strained to the breaking point. Overnight, as the storm bore down on urban flood zones, city officials ramped up emergency spaces to shelter thousands more people, mostly in public schools and colleges.

And that was the easy part.

In the three weeks since, the city has repeatedly relocated evacuees on short notice. To reopen schools, it bused many to armories, turning drill floors into open dormitories for the first time since a 1980s lawsuit halted the practice. Amid complaints of chaotic, unsanitary conditions, it then scattered hundreds of those people to \$300 hotel rooms, from Midtown Manhattan to remote parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

This week, officials closed all evacuation centers but two on Staten Island. Now they plan to rely solely on hotels, even as they brace for a new wave of people displaced from storm-damaged housing where they are facing winter without heat or hot water.

Hurricane Sandy was a disaster without modern precedent for the city that, in one night, created a new homeless population of thousands. But longtime advocates for the homeless, and families repeatedly dislocated since the storm, say it exposed and worsened the city's acute lack of affordable housing options.

"Moving people from drill floors to hotel rooms makes a lot of sense, but it begs the question: From there, where?" said Steven Banks, the chief lawyer of the Legal Aid Society, a veteran advocate for the homeless.

"The city gets high marks for the actual planning and execution of the evacuations," Mr. Banks added. "But now the harsh reality is that the city didn't have a recovery plan."

Seth Diamond, commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services, drew a line between evacuees and the “traditional homeless,” arguing that court-ordered rules on shelter standards do not apply to short-term shelter from a natural disaster.

“We’ve moved people to give us some time to assess the options,” Mr. Diamond said.

“If you look at the scope of what the city has done, the resources are there,” he added, noting that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was expected to cover hotel costs. “The same kind of resources will make sure that people are not left without a place to go.”

But desperation filled the accounts by weary evacuees who had been shuffled from one end of the city to the other, like the Etiennes, a family of seven flooded out of their \$1,250 first-floor rental in Far Rockaway, Queens. They had moved there a year ago after their landlord emptied their Queens apartment building and sold it.

“Total disaster — like 11 feet of water altogether,” said Taresté Etienne, 56, a former cabdriver disabled by a heart ailment, who more recently worked as a street vendor to help support his four children. The flood destroyed his whole stock.

“Everything is finished,” he said last week at the LaGuardia Airport Hotel, after hunting in vain for a store in the area where he could use food stamps to feed the family. He looked shellshocked as he watched his youngest, Cedric, 7, sleeping on a real bed for the first time in weeks in a hotel room that they will have to vacate on Dec. 2.

Their landlady rescued them before the storm, he said, providing two unheated rooms with no way to cook. As the dimensions of the disaster unfolded, they moved to cots in a warm hallway of an evacuation center at York College in Queens, grateful for hot meals. But on Nov. 6 they were roused in the night, herded onto buses with hundreds of others and left at the Franklin Avenue Armory in the Bronx.

“It’s like you were being processed to go to jail,” Mr. Etienne said, echoing many others who described waiting for hours in the cold to enter a vast sea of cots under constant fluorescent lights, with one shower for everybody and one toilet for men, where guards yelled into two-way radios all night and, Mr. Etienne and a Salvation Army official said, a couple had sex in the open.

On the third day, the family fled back to the landlady’s cold rooms, then started over at another high school evacuation center. By then, the remaining evacuees included children with autism and elderly and disabled people, many from nursing homes and halfway houses.

Mr. Diamond defended the decision to turn to social service contractors to open drill floors a week after the storm, when 4,000 people were still in evacuation centers, down from 7,000. (There are now just over 1,100, nearly all in hotels, but the cold-weather influx is still to come.) He would not respond to specific complaints about conditions or about treatment by staff members.

“It was a crisis,” he said. “Everyone was provided a safe, secure, warm place to stay, with food if necessary.”

“We had to move very quickly,” he added, noting that even with 90,000 hotel rooms in the city, vacancies run at only 10 percent, and that this is high tourist season. “The drill floors represented a good short-term solution. We recognized that they were not ideal, but they allowed us to open the schools, which was important for millions of New York City schoolchildren.”

Confusion about who was in charge made the chaos worse, said Annette Bethea, 49, another evacuee from the Rockaways. After the armory experience, she said, she sent her two younger sons, 12 and 9, to stay with different relatives who could ferry them to their distant schools. She also has a 21-year-old son in a wheelchair after a car accident, his surgery schedule derailed by the storm.

The hurricane claimed her job as a home health aide. With a dwindling \$1,500 nest egg from FEMA, she is now at the Comfort Inn in Flushing, Queens, hunting for an apartment to reunite the family. “I don’t even know who put me up in this hotel,” she said.

To handle evacuees at the Franklin Avenue Armory, city officials had turned abruptly to Samaritan Village, an agency that specializes in substance abusers and runs a Brooklyn men’s shelter under contract to the city. Unprepared for babies, it had no cribs the first night. Some babies fell from cots to the floor, said Patrick Markee, director of the Coalition for the Homeless.

A spokeswoman for Samaritan, Sheila Greene, responded in an e-mail, “We provided a safe and secure environment for all evacuees.”

The drill space is normally used for recreation and meals for 300 chronically homeless women who sleep on upper floors, in a program run by another city contractor, the Salvation Army. Maj. James Foley, a Salvation Army spokesman, said his agency was blamed for Samaritan’s mistakes.

“At a moment’s notice we were told this was going to happen,” Major Foley said. “We didn’t understand it, but we just did what we were told. We have women that attack one another, mentally unstable women. We had to confine them to the second and third floor.”

For some families, like the young parents of Zayden Lewis, a sturdy 6-month-old, the storm only escalated a continuing search for housing — but brought a surreal silver lining.

Zayden’s maternal family lost its so-called Advantage apartment in Brooklyn on Aug. 30, after the city ended that rental subsidy program in a dispute with the state over money. Officially, they were not homeless, since their application for shelter was repeatedly denied in the months before the storm, the baby’s mother, Shabria Covington, 19, explained.

But with no room for them in her aunt’s apartment in Canarsie, Brooklyn, they ended up sleeping in her aunt’s Toyota van outside. It was wrecked by the storm.

Redefined as evacuees, she and the baby’s father, Zamond Lewis, 23, were soon sent with their infant son to the Park Central Hotel, on Seventh Avenue and 56th Street in Midtown, with a view of Carnegie Hall. They are grateful, if bewildered.

“Better than sleeping in a car,” said Mr. Lewis, who had a few dollars from his last job as a carpenter’s helper. “But now we’re inside this expensive hotel where we can’t even feed ourselves.”

City officials explained that people moved to hotels were handled under a longstanding city contract with the American Red Cross that helps families burned out of their apartments. That contract does not include food, but Mr. Diamond said a food voucher program was being added.

Out at the LaGuardia Airport Hotel, Mr. Etienne tried to put the family’s ordeal in perspective, recalling how his daughter Isabelle, 11, asked him at one shelter, “Daddy, don’t you hate your life?”

His answer: “We are lucky to be alive.”