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by Anne Louise Bannon

The National Disaster Housing Strategy — or how we got from Katrina to Joplin

By Anne Louise Bannon

The problem: how to house hundreds, if not thousands, of displaced people in a disaster-ravaged area. Non-governmental agencies, friends and even federal aid can provide emergency shelter, but then there's the issue of how a large population can be provided with intermediate temporary housing for the extended period of time required to rebuild or replace local housing, *after* other, more urgent infrastructure repairs are made.

The debacle that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita resulted in federal legislation, reams of documents and, quite possibly, some lessons learned.

"It was evident that they had learned some very real lessons from Katrina," said Keith Stammer, director of emergency management for the City of Joplin and Jasper County, Mo., about the federal response after the May 23, 2011, tornado that ripped apart that community.

Missteps and miasmas

It took quite some time, however. At the end of September 2005, FEMA found itself in need of housing for more than 300,000 evacuees, more than 200,000 of them from the areas damaged by Katrina. At that time, officials pushed through emergency orders to various mobile home and trailer manufacturers, spending (according to a 2008 Washington Post story) almost \$2.7 billion.

By 2008, there were 17,000 plaintiffs alleging in law suits that the cheaply and quickly made trailers had caused serious illness due to exposure to high levels of formaldehyde, a toxic chemical used in the glue that holds together the plywood and particle board found in most mobile homes and trailers.

Given that the trailers, in particular, were never designed as extended living space, there were few federal oversights, because they were considered vehicles. In addition, again according to the Washington Post story, by Spencer S. Hsu, the specifications for the trailers and mobile homes comprised only a 25-line document that lacked many specifics.

By 2006, Congress wrote and passed the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which required FEMA officials to create a National Disaster Housing Strategy by July 1, 2007. But FEMA apparently fumbled the ball.

According to a July 21, 2008, report from the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, the strategy document was not only a year late, it fell short of the kind of planning Congress had wanted to see, intending to create a task force, instead.

"Simply put, FEMA has taken twenty months to report that a new entity should be created to develop the strategic plan that Congress required of FEMA in PKEMRA," the report reads.

The Senate committee report took issue with the FEMA document in several areas, particularly regarding FEMA's desire to create a task force to develop the plan.

"FEMA could have put together the Task Force it now seeks in October of 2006, and had it done so there might well be a usable disaster housing plan today instead of more delay," the report says.



AP Photo/Tim Mueller Renaissance Village resident Deronte Jones, 7, makes his way to the basketball court Wednesday, July 25, 2007, at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's trailer site in Baker, La. Residents at the trailer park thought FEMA would test trailers Wednesday for formaldehyde, but were told random test would be conducted at Renaissance Village at a later date.



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The report was also critical of FEMA's continued use of trailers in extraordinary disasters; of what it called unrealistic burdens on individuals, as well as state and local governments; and that the document lacked an emergency shelter plan and a rental repair plan.

Trying again

The result was a new document, the National Disaster Housing Strategy, running 94 pages and dated January 16, 2009, and while it consists mostly of potential solutions, there are clear chains of responsibility, from individual responsibility all the way to federal agencies.

"Meeting urgent housing needs while enabling individuals, households, and communities to rebuild and restore their way of life is a complex equation that requires all those involved in disaster housing — including all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector — to navigate a broad range of competing and interdependent factors," the strategy states in Chapter 3, Disaster Housing: Principals, Practices and Directions.

(The document is available [online](#). FEMA declined to allow any interviews with agency personnel for this article.)

The document also lays out standards for manufactured housing (aka mobile homes), including standards for formaldehyde specifically: "FEMA now requires that all manufacturers provide temporary housing units that meet indoor air levels for formaldehyde that are less than 0.016 parts per million." (page 59)

In addition, the strategy recommends looking at alternative forms of interim housing for disaster victims, that is, those who need housing for an extended period of time when there is insufficient rental housing (the preferred option). These include different types of manufactured housing, including homes assembled from pre-made panels or modules.

Also, the document specifies that the special needs of disaster victims with disabilities must be met, and that the needs of families with household pets be taken into account, in both the emergency sheltering and the interim housing phases.

A small(er)-scale trial

FEMA is also refining its response. The agency's National Disaster Recovery Framework, issued in September 2011, outlines six Housing Recovery Support Functions, along with the agencies responsible for each.

But in practice, while Stammer, Joplin's emergency management director, seemed pleased with the FEMA response to his community's need for interim housing, the response was to put up almost 600 mobile homes, albeit constructed under the newer, tighter standards.

Also, Stammer acknowledged that the social dynamic within the communities occasionally gets a little strained. "By and large, you and I choose where we're going to live," he said. "None of these people get that choice, they have no place else to live. The social dynamics are not always opportune."

One St. Louis TV station reported that two meth labs had been found in the communities, and in a Nov. 3 [report](#), the family interviewed complained that some families seemed reluctant to find permanent housing, a concern that Stammer echoed. In fact, he pointed out that the homes some families lost were run-down rental units and that the mobile homes were actually an improvement.

But overall, he said that FEMA did quite a bit to make the interim housing parks work as well as possible, including installing some internet access to help people look for jobs and including a police substation and a post office.

"They did a very good in-depth analysis of who really needed housing," Stammer said. "Then they only brought in mobile housing units, as needed."

It should be noted that the tornado that struck Joplin caused fairly localized damage, and while the city lost 7,500 buildings, at the peak, FEMA only had to provide 586 interim homes. In the hurricane disasters of 2005, hundreds of thousands of families were displaced throughout multiple states.

So while it's clear that improvements have been made, the new strategy has yet to be tested under truly large-scale catastrophic conditions.

[Ed.: This snapshot of current U.S. disaster housing issues and policies will be followed in the coming months by several more articles looking at various actual and proposed technologies and designs for disaster housing.]

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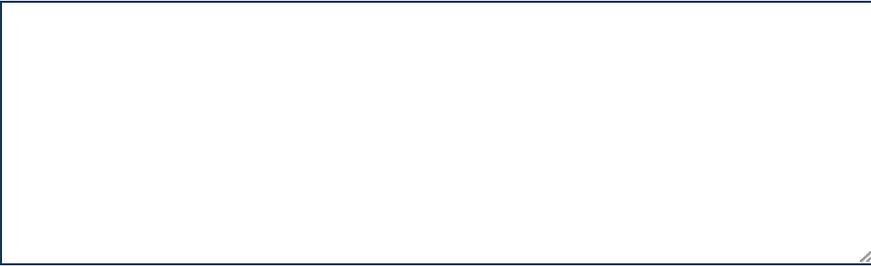
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