

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Number 21

January 2006

MEETING THE HOUSING NEEDS OF HURRICANE EVACUEES WITHOUT DOING MORE HARM THAN GOOD

**Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.
Mayo Research Institute**

Two major principles inform the decision to provide temporary housing for Louisiana residents whose homes were destroyed or severely damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The first is their need for housing that cannot be met through the private sector of the economy which urges the community to intervene and find suitable housing for them. Second, in acting in a public manner the community must be mindful that it must avoid doing more harm than good. The first principle prompts us to act, the second cautions us to proceed carefully.

No thoughtful, caring person would argue that all of the tens of thousands of applicants for FEMA housing assistance should be dismissed out of hand and told to fend for themselves. Surely among them are many who have acted responsibly in this matter but simply do not have the personal or family resources to secure their own housing without the help of the community. The single most telling difference between them and the rest of us in Louisiana is that their homes were destroyed while ours were spared. Their need is clear and present and provides a compelling justification for public intervention.

FEMA's customary practice of calling for an environmental assessment before siting temporary housing units affirms the second principle that cautions us to proceed carefully, to avoid any harm that might result from a hasty decision based on poor or incomplete information. It follows that any assessment undertaken should provide the full range of information that the community and local public officials require to assure that in making their final decisions to provide temporary housing for the needy they avoid doing more harm than good.

The problem with FEMA's environmental assessment is that it is much too narrowly constructed. For example, the assessment of one current proposal to provide emergency temporary housing for upwards of 1,500 persons in as many as 500 trailers on a 64 acre site in Lake Charles does not provide sufficient information on the harm that might result in three specific areas: traffic, hazardous materials, and safety and security. The following refers only to the problems regarding safety and security. We quote directly from the FEMA assessment document.

No concerns anticipated. The contractor would place fencing around the site perimeters to protect residents from trespassers and provide a barrier to surrounding properties. The contractor would post appropriate signage and fencing to minimize potential adverse public safety concerns. Appropriate signage and barriers should be in place prior to construction activities in order to alert pedestrians and motorists of project activities and traffic pattern changes.

Nowhere in the assessment does FEMA even acknowledge that the children and adults who use the new and elaborate public recreation facilities that abut the proposed site would be required to traverse the entire length of the site to access those facilities because there is only one access road to the facilities and the proposal would place FEMA trailers on both sides of that access road. This safety issue is compounded by the fact that the facilities have lighted fields of play which means that children and adults will be accessing them after dark when visibility along the access road is reduced.

Further, and potentially much more significant, is the assessment's failure to even indicate that there is a public elementary school that abuts the proposed trailer site and the potentially serious safety and security problems for the children, staff, faculty, and parents who attend, work at, or come to the school.

By now the public is fully aware that there is a serious sex offender/child predator problem in Louisiana. The Louisiana online registry of convicted sex offenders/child predators indicates that there are, for example, 612 such offenders living in Calcasieu Parish alone. In Orleans Parish more than twice that many are registered. Late last month a report prepared by the Associated Press stated that the federal Administration for Children and Families matched more than 2,000 applicants for disaster assistance with the names on sex offender registries in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The AP quoted Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as saying in a letter to Texas Governor Rick Perry "I am greatly concerned that known sex offenders who may have relocated to your state may take advantage of their anonymity and harm children once again."

Louisiana law (R.S. 15:538) states the following.

no sexual offender, whose offense involved a minor child, shall be eligible for probation, parole, or suspension of sentence unless, as a condition thereof, the sexual offender is prohibited from ... (b) physically residing within one thousand feet of any public or private elementary or secondary school, day care facility, playground, public or private youth center, public swimming pool, or free-standing video arcade facility.

The same 1000-foot prohibition applies to "any sexual offender whose offense involved a minor child, and who was placed on probation or was paroled prior to August 15, 2004, and is on probation or parole as of August 15, 2005..."

A lengthy article in the *Washington Post* last September described conditions at a FEMA trailer park in Charlotte County Florida designed to accommodate 1,500 Hurricane Charley evacuees in 500 trailers on a 64 acre site.

“FEMA City is now a socioeconomic time bomb just waiting to blow up,” said Bob Hebert, director of recovery for Charlotte County, where most FEMA City residents used to live. **“You throw together all these very different people under already tremendous stress, and bad things will happen. And this is the really difficult part: In our county, there’s no other place for many of them to go.”**

The unhappy consequence is that FEMA City’s population has barely declined -- its trailers are occupied by 1,500 check-out clerks, nurse’s aides, aluminum siding hangers, landscapers and more than a few people too old, too sick or too upset to work. A not-insignificant number of illegal immigrants and ex-convicts live there as well.

Based on his experience with this trailer park, Herbert offered this advice on providing public housing assistance in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

“Don’t make big camps with thousands of people, because it doesn’t work. It makes a bad situation and, for many people, actually makes it worse.”

Common sense alone tells us that in order to limit any harm before it happens -- harm such as an innocent child who is enticed into a car by a child predator and molested, or an elderly woman whose purse is snatched by teenagers with nothing to do -- it is necessary to limit the number of persons housed at any one site. Ten sites with 50 trailers for 150 evacuees are vastly superior to one site with 500 trailers for 1,500 evacuees. The thorny challenge for the community and for public officials is to resist the initially easier remedy of building a large temporary housing site because experience shows that a site of that kind in the end does not provide suitable, safe housing for the needy. Rather it deteriorates into a fenced camp that *warehouses* the most dependent and vulnerable of all in an environment that some at the Charlotte County Florida site described as a prison.

Edward J. O’Boyle is Senior Research Associate with Mayo Research Institute. Since he completed his doctorate in economics from Saint Louis University in 1972, Dr. O’Boyle has been specializing in economic research and analysis increasingly from the perspective of the human person engaged in everyday activities both as a unique individual and as a community member. In January 2004 the Association for Social Economics conferred on Dr. O’Boyle its prestigious Thomas Divine Award for lifetime contributions to social economics and the social economy.
