



# TACOMA HOUSING AUTHORITY

## **TACOMA HOUSING AUTHORITY'S REVIEW OF ITS KATRINA DISASTER RELIEF EFFORT**

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## Preface

*Mr. L is a 45 year-old single man and life long resident of New Orleans, Louisiana. His career as a construction worker had ended due to spinal injuries. He became disabled.*

*He recalled the local weather reports describing the location and direction of the hurricane. He also remembers the mandatory orders to evacuate. His financial resources were limited and he remained in his apartment. The hurricane landed on August 29, 2005. He described the roar of the winds and the rising water. The water trapped Mr. L in a third floor apartment building. He had to escape to the roof top. He was rescued within three days.*

*Mr. L landed at a local shelter. He was put on a bus to Houston, TX. There was no room there for him at the Astrodome. After some more shelter stays, he boarded another bus out of town without knowing its destination. After a day on the bus, he learned it was headed to Tacoma. He had no family here. He had no friends here. He had never been here. But he thought "he would give us a try."*

*He arrived with nothing. He had lost his home, his car, and all of his personal possessions. His family members, including an elderly mother and five sisters, had been separated after the initial shelter stay. Upon his arrival in Tacoma, he contacted the Tacoma Housing Authority for assistance. THA was able to house him at one of its high-rise buildings for seniors and disabled persons, where he lives still.*

*Moving him into his new home was just the beginning of the effort on his behalf. THA's Katrina caseworker assessed his needs. She arranged for Tacoma Goodwill to provide furniture for Mr. L's apartment. She arranged for St. John's Baptist Church to deliver the furniture. She untangled the confusion that delayed his monthly Social Security check. He had direct deposit of the check into a New Orleans bank that had ceased to function because of hurricane damage. The matter was further complicated by his successive moves. The caseworker also arranged for necessary medical care. Shortly before the hurricane, Mr. L had back surgery. Because of his displacement, he did not get necessary after care. By the time he arrived in Tacoma, he needed some urgent medical attention. THA's caseworker brought him to an urgent care clinic. She then found a back specialist for the more intensive care he needed. At the same time, she prevailed on DSHS to greatly expedite his Medicaid coverage to allow for payment.*

*Mr. L is now stabilized and rebuilding his life. He is back in touch with his family.*

*He reports that he never expected to encounter the help he received in Tacoma from so many service providers and people. He expresses his gratitude for what he found here.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the American Gulf Coast. It caused widespread destruction. It may have been the largest single housing disaster the nation has experienced from one event. Hundreds of thousands of families fled to other parts of the nation. Some of them came to Tacoma. This report summarizes the efforts of the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) as part of a local collaboration of partners to respond to the crisis. It outlines THA's Katrina Disaster Relief Plan. It describes what the evacuees needed when they arrived and the services THA's Plan was able to provide. This report also reviews what it was like to work with FEMA and FEMA related programs. The report concludes with some observations and lessons learned.

The City of Tacoma is located in Pierce County in the state of Washington. The 2000 census reports 193,556 people living in Tacoma. It is the third largest city in the state. Washington's largest city, Seattle (population 563,376), is 30 miles north of Tacoma. The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is 18 miles north of Tacoma. Two military installations, Fort Lewis Army Post and McChord Air Force Base, are located in Pierce County just south of Tacoma. Tacoma is a major international port. Interstate 5 (I-5), rail and water transportation systems link Tacoma with the larger Puget Sound region that stretches from Everett to Olympia.

THA is a public housing authority. It began operations in 1941. It has a five-member Board of Commissioners, whom the Mayor appoints. Its mission is to provide high quality housing and housing assistance to low-income persons. It seeks to do this in a way that promotes their self-sufficiency and that complements the development of the community. THA also provides related supportive services. It provides services for several reasons that turned out to be quite applicable to the Katrina evacuees. **First**, THA targets its housing assistance to the neediest households in the City. Some of them need help to succeed as tenants. Some, for example, come to THA from trauma such as domestic violence or homelessness. Services help them stabilize. **Second**, THA wants them to succeed not just as tenants but parents, students and wage earners. In these ways, THA seeks to make its housing a transforming experience for its assisted families. Services make this more likely to happen.

THA presently provides housing and housing assistance to over 5,000 low-income households in the City of Tacoma. THA owns and operates 1,100 units of public housing and 185 other affordable housing units. It is the City's largest residential landlord. It also administers 3,524 Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8). Its annual budget is \$35,000,000. THA has 86 full time staff.

Despite its broad array of programs and services, however, THA has not generally understood itself to be a source of emergency shelter. Its programs are not designed for a fast response. In the normal course, THA selects persons from highly structured waiting lists on which people usually wait for a long time before receiving assistance. The Katrina experience tested THA's ability to respond quickly and in a helpful way.

## 2. **KATRINA**

Hurricane Katrina was among the most destructive natural disasters in the history of the United States. It hit the Gulf Coast in late August 2005. The storm caused major damage along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. In particular, it destroyed large sections of New Orleans. It breached levees protecting New Orleans, ultimately flooding roughly 80% of the city and many areas of neighboring parishes. Severe wind damage occurred well inland. The storm killed more than 2,000 people. More than 700 people remain categorized as missing in Louisiana, so the number who perished is not final even nine months after the storm. The total damage from Katrina is estimated at \$75 billion. It may be the largest loss of housing the nation has suffered from a single event.

The President directed the Department of Homeland Security, to coordinate the federal response to the Katrina disaster. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) led the federal effort. FEMA, and its leadership, would come under harsh criticism for a perceived lack of planning and coordination.

FEMA and other authorities organized efforts to transport evacuees to other parts of the nation. The national government organized some airlifts that took people to various places. The planning for these airlifts exhibited a considerable amount of confusion. They were soon abandoned, although not before local communities, including Tacoma, received notice to expect their arrivals. In the end, the evacuees who arrived in the Tacoma area came on their own.

Katrina redistributed New Orleans' population across the United States. Thirty-five thousand people relocated to Houston, Texas. Mobile, Alabama, gained over 24,000 people. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, gained over 15,000. Two weeks after the storm, communities in over half of the States were providing shelter for evacuees. By four weeks after the storm, Katrina evacuees registered with FEMA were in all 50 states.

The American Red Cross, Salvation Army, public housing authorities and many other charitable organizations in the receiving communities throughout the nation provided housing, food and water to the victims of the storm.

## 3. **ARRIVALS IN WASHINGTON STATE**

The best estimate of the number of evacuees arriving in Washington State comes from the number of households registered with FEMA. By this calculation, 1,939 Katrina evacuee households were in Washington State by the end of February 2006. Of these, 311 registrations were in Pierce County. FEMA has not published the actual number of persons that these households contain. Pierce County emergency management staff estimates a range of 2.5 to 3.0 evacuees per registration. By this reckoning, around 5,000 evacuees registered with FEMA in the state of Washington and around 800 evacuees registered with FEMA in Pierce County. Appendix "Katrina Relocations in Washington State as of February 26, 2006" shows the distribution of evacuees throughout the state. The highest number of registered evacuee households was 887 in King County. Pierce County was second highest with its 311.

Initially, FEMA alerted Washington State authorities to expect airlifts of up to 2,000 evacuees. Washington State, through the coordinating efforts of its Department of

Community, Trade, and Economic Development (DCTED) started to make arrangements to receive these persons as they landed at either Fort Lewis or McCord Air Force Base just south of Tacoma. Plans were in the works to bus them to hotels near Olympia for distribution to local communities around the state. THA and other local service organizations prepared to assist. Receiving these households in such numbers was the initial challenge of THA's disaster planning effort.

The airlifts did not occur. This was fortunate. Although local planning by then was well underway, it is doubtful that the area could have been prepared to serve large numbers of evacuees coming off airplanes.

Instead, evacuees arrived in Tacoma on their own and over a prolonged period. They came by bus, train, plane, car and hitchhiking. Many came because they had family members or friends in the area. Many had family members who had served at Fort Lewis Army base or McChord Airforce Base. These local contacts were often an important resource. The ones who arrived without any local support or acquaintance with the area had the harder time.

#### **4. EVACUEES AND THEIR NEEDS**

**One hundred and seven (107)** households contacted THA for assistance, usually by telephone. **Sixty-three (63)** completed the application process THA set up for them.

During the initial meetings and interviews with each evacuee, the Katrina caseworker completed an assessment identifying various needs and started a case plan. The case plan was designed to track referrals made on behalf of the client and to establish an appropriate time line for community service agencies to respond. The caseworker also learned whether the applicants were previous Public Housing or Housing Choice Voucher recipients. Almost all of the applicants were not previous Public Housing or Housing Choice Voucher recipients. They were not familiar with the process of applying for housing assistance. Most were also not experienced in applying for other types of social services. They depended on the caseworker to help them navigate that application processes for housing and other services.

Prior to their arrival in Washington State, the evacuees that applied to THA had been scattered in a minimum of three (3) shelters around the nation. They faced significant challenges in Tacoma. They were thousands of miles from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area generally with little or no family support or friends. Many were totally disconnected from family members who were unaware of their whereabouts and not knowing if they survived. Some had witnessed the death of a family member or friend. They seemed physically and mentally broken. Many acknowledged the shock of living through the storm and exhibited signs of stress, anxiety and depression.

The evacuees presented the following immediate needs:

- ▶ Housing, both emergency and permanent
- ▶ Cash
- ▶ Employment
- ▶ Clothing and shoes

- ▶ Enroll children in school
- ▶ Health and dental care
- ▶ Mental health services
- ▶ Prescription medications and medical supplies
- ▶ Childcare
- ▶ Transportation

The following charts summarize the demographic attributes of the evacuee households that contacted THA for assistance.

<b>THA KATRINA APPLICANTS: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION</b>			
<b>Total Households</b>		<b>107</b>	
<b>Total Adults</b>		<b>121</b>	
	<b>Adult Men</b>	<b>45</b>	
	<b>Adult Women</b>	<b>76</b>	
<b>Minor Children</b>		<b>62</b>	
<b>Pregnancies</b>		<b>7</b>	
<b>Race of Household</b>			
	<b>African-American</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>56%</b>
	<b>White</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>43%</b>
	<b>Asian</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1%</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Households with disabled member</b>			
		<b>23</b>	<b>22%</b>

## 5. THA's KATRINA DISASTER RELIEF PLAN

The appendix contains a copy of THA's Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief Plan.

### 5.1 THA's Planning Process

By September 1, 2005, as the disaster unfolded on television, THA, under the leadership of its Board of Commissioners, began to plan how it would assist Hurricane Katrina victims who arrived in the area. Its planning efforts began with consultation with local officials and other service organizations. These included the following:

- ▶ Mayor of the City of Tacoma
- ▶ City of Tacoma Council members
- ▶ City of Tacoma Department of Human Rights/Human Services
- ▶ Office of the Pierce County Executive
- ▶ Pierce County Department of Community Services
- ▶ Pierce County Emergency Management staff
- ▶ Tacoma-Pierce County United Way
- ▶ Pierce County Housing Authority
- ▶ King County Housing Authority
- ▶ Seattle Housing Authority
- ▶ Tacoma Pierce County Human Services Coalition
- ▶ Tacoma-Pierce County Affordable Housing Consortium
- ▶ Tacoma Housing Authority Resident Advisory Board
  
- ▶ Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development

These consultations were important for two reasons. **First**, it was immediately clear that the projected arrivals would overwhelm any single agency. Collaboration was essential. Ultimately, DCTED helpfully emerged as the state's lead planning agency and the local contact for FEMA.

**Second**, it was also clear that any assistance local agencies contributed from their limited resources would constitute a redirection of resources from needy local populations. For example, more than 2,000 households are on THA's waiting list for public housing; 3,500 are waiting for one of its Housing Choice Voucher. Many more would be waiting except THA closes the waiting lists when they get that long. The community has its own full share of homeless persons. Any assistance that THA provided would mean that these local needy people would wait still longer for help. In this way, THA's contribution was really their contribution. Before making such a commitment, it was important to consult.



THA identified the following principles to govern its efforts:

- ▶ THA would coordinate its efforts with those of the State of Washington, the national government and local agencies, public and private;
- ▶ In the provision of housing vouchers and units under the Plan, Katrina evacuees would not take any precedence over local households who needed them because they were facing displacement from THA's redevelopment projects. This was important. The Katrina disaster caught THA in the middle of a major effort to relocate large numbers of families from Salishan, its largest public housing community. This relocation was necessary to make way for the demolition and rebuilding of an entire neighborhood. THA has important legal and moral obligations to help these families find alternative housing. In planning for Katrina relief, THA resolved not to create more local homeless families by redirecting resources that they needed for their own relocation.
- ▶ THA would make its assistance as helpful and flexible as possible within the limits of the resources that the Plan set aside for the purpose. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided very helpful guidance, permitting considerable flexibility of this sort in the administration of federal housing programs that were certainly not designed as sources of emergency assistance.
- ▶ THA would take all available steps to so arrange its assistance and that of others in order to qualify for either up-front funds or reimbursement from the national or state government. As we note below, this hope for reimbursement did not turn out too well.

On September 21, 2005, the THA Board of Commissioners adopted the Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief Plan. A copy is attached as an appendix.

## 5.2 Elements of THA's Plan

THA's Plan consisted of three main elements:

- ▶ *Housing and Housing Assistance:* THA committed up to 100 Housing Choice Vouchers and up to 25 apartments for Katrina evacuees.
- ▶ *Case Management:* THA dedicated one full time caseworker to the plan. The caseworker's responsibilities included the following:
  - provide case management services for evacuees receiving THA housing or housing assistance;
  - match eligible families with housing and services from THA and from others service providers

- devise a individual case plan with each family that identified goals for their permanent residence, employment and services needs and the steps to get them done.

THA's Plan also put \$50,000 at the disposal of the Katrina caseworker for urgent needs that could not be met from any other source.

- ▶ *Coordination:* THA also sought to coordinate the housing contributions of other housing providers, including private landlords.

The Plan outlined eligibility for THA's Katrina housing assistance. Evacuees were expected to register with FEMA, register with the Red Cross and contact the Department of Social and Health Service's Community Services Office in order to access the assistance available through these sources. Recipients of THA assistance also had to meet the following criteria:

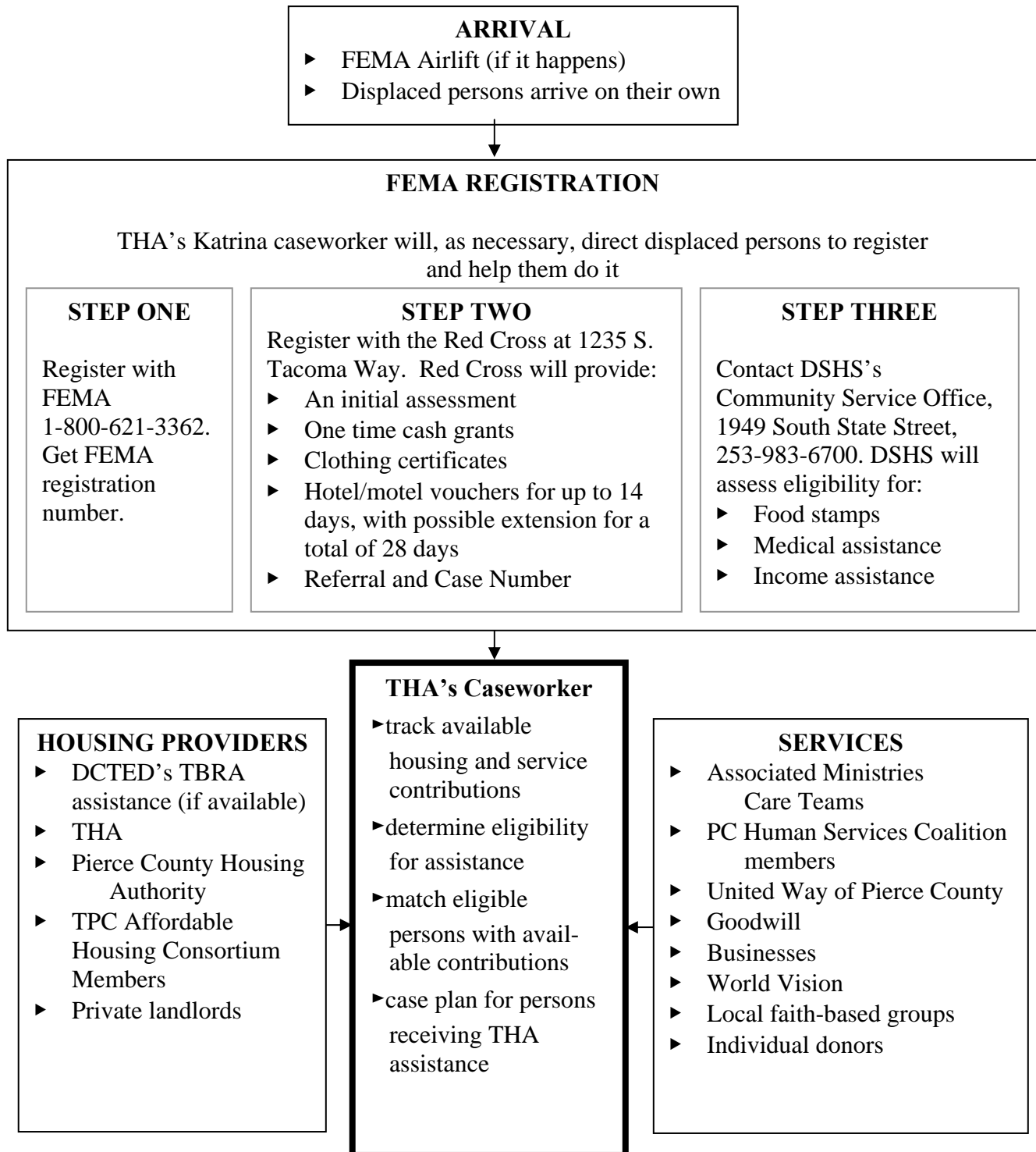
- ▶ Displaced by Katrina
- ▶ Homeless
- ▶ Already in the Tacoma area and ready to use THA's assistance
- ▶ Without disqualifying criminal history, and
- ▶ Appeared to be eligible under the housing program that would be providing the housing assistance.

THA's regular Lease & Occupancy staff were responsible for determining eligibility for vouchers or units. They gave scheduling priority to Katrina applicants. This was a notable adjustment for a staff that was already overloaded with regular work. These staff asked displaced persons for available documentation showing that the applicant fit the eligibility criteria. In the absence of documentation, THA allowed evacuees to self-declare for the first 90 days of assistance. THA did not delay assistance for lack of paperwork. All assisted persons signed a form attesting to the truth of their information and informing them that misrepresentations, if discovered, would disqualify them from further assistance and result in eviction or termination of assistance.

The Plan outlined the priority for receiving THA housing assistance. People who had been Housing Choice Voucher participants in the Gulf Coast were given first priority. People who were public housing residents at the time of their displacement were given second priority. KDHAP (Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program), HUD's primary new program for Katrina relief, was limited to serving these populations. In the end, however, none of the families that THA assisted were in either of these categories. All were the third priority of persons who had not been receiving federal housing assistance at the time of the Hurricane.

The Plan outlined THA's coordination with other housing providers and providers of social services.

The following flow chart summarizes the Plan's elements:



### 5.3 Coordination with the Effort of Others

THA's efforts were only part of a larger local effort of public and private organizations:

#### 5.3.1 *Planning Coordination*

THA coordinated its planning efforts with many others in the Puget Sound area. DCTED convened a team of Puget Sound housing authorities. THA distributed its Katrina Disaster Relief Plan to this housing authority team. Several housing authorities used it as a basis for their own plan.

THA also joined an ad hoc committee of Pierce County, state and federal representatives. Tom Hilyard, Director of Human Services for Pierce County, chaired the committee and provided necessary direction. Under his leadership, this Committee compiled and distributed two resource guides for hurricane relief. One guide was for service providers and one was for evacuees. The appendix contains a copy of these guides. The ad hoc group also held a one-day Assistance Workshop on November 4, 2005. At the workshop, evacuees connected with services and support. THA accepted and processed housing applications at the workshop.

#### 5.3.2 *Contributions from Partners*

THA's main contribution to the effort was its housing vouchers and apartments, its case management services for the families who received its housing assistance and cash for emergent needs. It also helped to coordinate the efforts of others.

Many local agencies, public and private, as well as private landlords, contributed. This was essential. The effort showed the advantage of having an array of services delivered by such capable local agencies that know the community well. The following is a partial list of the local partners THA worked with most directly. [PLEASE NOTE: The list omits some private landlords and donors who requested to remain unnamed.]

- ▶ American Red Cross, Mount Rainier Chapter
- ▶ Associated Ministries of Tacoma/Pierce County
- ▶ Bates Technical College
- ▶ Catholic Community Services
- ▶ City of Tacoma Dept. of Human Rights/Human Services
- ▶ Clover Park School District
- ▶ Comprehensive Mental Health
- ▶ Community Health Care Clinics
- ▶ Eastside Baptist Church
- ▶ Good Samaritan Outreach and Mental Health Services

- ▶ Goodwill, Inc. of Tacoma
- ▶ Greater Lakes Mental Health
- ▶ Hidden Hills Apartments
- ▶ King County Housing Authority
- ▶ Lakeview Light and Power
- ▶ Martin Luther King Housing Development Association
- ▶ Pacific Lutheran University
- ▶ Physicians Services Network
- ▶ Pierce County Aging and Long Term Care
- ▶ Pierce County Department of Community Services
- ▶ Pierce County Housing Authority
- ▶ Prince Hall Masons
- ▶ Ray Gibson Caballeros Club
- ▶ Renton Housing Authority
- ▶ Salishan Lutheran Mission
- ▶ Salvation Army
- ▶ Seattle Housing Authority
- ▶ St. John's Baptist Church
- ▶ Tacoma Ministerial Alliance
- ▶ Tacoma Power
- ▶ Tacoma School District
- ▶ United Way of Pierce County
- ▶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security (local FEMA office)
- ▶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- ▶ Washington Dental Association
- ▶ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services
- ▶ Washington State Employment Security Department
- ▶ Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development

## 6. HOUSING AND HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Housing was perhaps the most prominent of unmet needs facing the evacuee households. The chart below summarizes the housing assistance provided under THA's Plan. In total, THA and its local partners provided permanent housing or housing assistance to **forty (40)** households that had sought housing assistance from THA. Other families also received varying levels of temporary housing assistance.

<b>Katrina Applicants Report: As of June 12, 2006</b>	
<b><i>Contacts</i></b>	
Number of Households Contacted THA for Assistance	107
<b><i>Applications</i></b>	
Number of Households Submitted Applications	63
Number of Applicants former Public Housing Voucher Household	0
Number of Applications Awaiting Verification	0
Number of Applicants Confirmed Eligible for Katrina Assistance	56
Number of Applications Withdrawn by Household	18
Number of Active, Eligible Applicants Offered Housing Assistance	47
<b><i>Housing Assistance</i></b>	
<i>CTED/FEMA Program</i>	
Number of Households Issued a CTED/FEMA Certificate	14
Number of Households Housed under CTED/FEMA Program	12
<i>Housing Choice Voucher</i>	
Number of Households Issued a Housing Choice Voucher	16
Number of Households THA Administering Another HA's HCV	0
Number of Voucher Holders Housed	11
<i>Public Housing</i>	
Number of Households Housed in Public Housing Unit	3
<i>Other THA Housing</i>	
Number of Households Placed in Other THA Housing (not PH)	0
<i>Other People's Housing</i>	
Number Housed in Other Agency's Housing*	14
<b>TOTAL Number of Households Housed</b>	<b>40</b>
<b><i>Case management</i></b>	
Number of Households with a Case Plan	35

*\*Includes those who applied with THA, but were later housed with another housing authority*

**Summary of the Chart:**

**One hundred and seven (107)** evacuee households contacted THA by phone or in person seeking help with housing. The phone calls came from all over the United States. **Sixty-three (63)** evacuees who had arrived in the Tacoma/Pierce County area completed housing applications. Immediately prior to the hurricane, these evacuees were either homeowners or resided in private rentals.

THA's Katrina caseworker and Leasing and Operations staff were in contact with the evacuees daily to provide information and answer questions about the eligibility process. Helping them complete the housing application process required a significant amount of staff time.

FEMA provided eligible and registered evacuees with an initial payment of \$2,358 per household intended to pay rental fees for an apartment or home for up to three months. Many evacuees reported spending the money for other essentials and quickly exhausted their benefit amounts.

By June 2006, THA provided or arranged for the provision of permanent housing or housing assistance for **forty (40)** families. These resources came from THA, the CTED/FEMA housing assistance program, or the other collaborating local agencies. It also came from private landlords who contributed housing rent-free. Because of these most valuable and timely contributions of others, THA did not have to use all of the 100 Vouchers or 25 apartments it was prepared to offer. Instead, by the end of the Plan, THA provided **eleven (11)** Housing Choice Vouchers and **three (3)** apartments.

The range of housing and housing assistance was as follows:

- ▶ **Thirteen (13)** evacuee households received security deposit and rental assistance from THA and CTED for three months.
- ▶ **Sixteen (16)** evacuees received a voucher from THA's Housing Choice Voucher Program and used the voucher to move into apartments in the City of Tacoma. [HUD provided a program that would have allowed THA to provide a special HUD funded Voucher to a family who, at the time of the hurricane, was participating in those programs. This would have allowed THA to seek reimbursement for this expense from HUD. However, none of the families who sought assistance from THA had been participating the programs.]
- ▶ **Eight (8)** evacuees were approved for Pierce County Housing Authority's Housing Choice Voucher Program and moved into apartments within the county areas.
- ▶ **Four (4)** evacuees households received apartments with the Martin Luther King Housing Development Association.
- ▶ **Three (3)** evacuees moved into THA's Public Housing units.

- ▶ **Two (2)** evacuees moved into new units at Salishan.
- ▶ **Two (2)** evacuees received vouchers from the Seattle Housing Authority.
- ▶ **Eight (8)** evacuees moved into market rate units on their own without assistance.
- ▶ **Eighteen (18)** evacuees withdrew their housing applications.
- ▶ **Two (2)** families received six months of rent-free housing from Hidden Hills Apartments, a private rental property.
- ▶ **Forty (40)** evacuee households received housing resource guides and information.



## 7. **NON-HOUSING SERVICES**

Under the Plan, THA arranged for non-housing services from the many collaborating local agencies.

### 7.1 **Cash Assistance**

THA assisted **sixty-five (65)** Katrina evacuees notify the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of their arrival in Washington State. This was necessary to make them eligible for any other FEMA assistance.

THA assisted evacuees with **sixty-five (65)** telephone registrations for disaster assistance programs, application for Transitional Housing Assistance or rental assistance, and motel/ hotel vouchers.

THA assisted **sixty (60)** Katrina evacuees in completing applications for Department of Social and Health Services programs, specifically Medicaid, Food Stamps, and TANF programs.

THA assisted in contacting the Social Security Administration and assisted **eleven (11)** Katrina evacuees in completing Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications.

THA referred **thirty-five (35)** Katrina evacuees to Washington State Employment office for unemployment benefits.

### 7.2 **Assistance in Obtaining Clothing Items and Shoes**

The Department of Social and Health Services provided **fifty (50)** department store vouchers for evacuees.

Tacoma Goodwill launched a voucher assistance program in collaboration with the American Red Cross. **Sixty (60)** evacuees that THA referred received gift certificates that allowed them to purchase clothing and household items. The Salvation Army also offered vouchers to **fifty (50)** THA families for the same purpose.

### 7.3 **Assistance with School Enrollment and Child Care**

THA provided **twenty-four (24)** parents with Tacoma Public Schools enrollment information and referrals to the City of Tacoma's Child Care Connection for day care resources.

### 7.4 **Health Care and Dental Services**

THA referred **sixty-five (65)** evacuees who needed health or dental care to numerous agencies including the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Department of Social and Health Services, Physicians Services Network, the Dental Association, Community Health Clinics, and local hospitals.

**7.5 Mental Health and Counseling Services**

Comprehensive Mental Health Center, Good Samaritan Outreach and Mental Health Services, and Greater Lakes Mental Health provided free group therapy and counseling services for parents and children related to trauma and stress disorders. THA referred **ten (10)** families directly to Comprehensive Mental Health Center for these purposes. It referred **two (2)** families to the Tacoma Public School District and **one (1)** family to Clover Park School District for counseling.

**7.6 Prescription Medications and Medical Supplies**

THA referred **forty (40)** evacuees to Region 5 of the Department of Social and Health Services to obtain emergency vouchers to purchase prescription medications.

**7.7 Seek Employment Opportunities and Job Placement**

THA referred **forty-five (45)** evacuees to Washington State's Employment Security Office for the services of an Employment Specialist to assist evacuees with employment readiness training, skill development, and resume writing.

THA referred **ten (10)** evacuees to Bates Vocational School for literacy classes and GED completion.

**7.8 Transportation**

THA partnered and collaborated with Associated Ministries Care Teams to provide transportation and bus passes for **twenty (20)** evacuees to complete applications at various community agencies.

**7.9 Assistance Applying for Social Services Programs**

THA's caseworker linked all **sixty-five (65)** households to essential social services and community services programs, both local and state.

**7.10 Care Teams**

Tacoma-Pierce County Associated Ministries recruited and trained 125 individuals to serve on 47 Care Teams. The Teams helped Hurricane Katrina families transition to life in Pierce County. THA's Katrina caseworker coordinated closely with Care Teams who helped evacuees find housing and connect with local services.

## 8. SOME OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Katrina Disaster Relief Plan was a new experience for THA. THA's housing and services programs are not designed to provide emergency assistance on short notice. Using them for such a purpose was a challenge. The experience of working with FEMA was also new for THA. Working with other local partners was not new. The agencies and service providers of Tacoma and Pierce County know each other well. These relationships served to make the effort as coordinated and effective as it was. The experience elicits the following observations and lessons:

### 8.1 Working with FEMA

Working with FEMA was a challenging experience and not one that THA could necessarily recommend to others. Local FEMA staff clearly did their best in a very hard spot. The main problem appeared to be inadequate or unclear information from FEMA's central office. DCTED bore the main burden of coordinating with FEMA directly and conveying information and instruction to local agencies. DCTED did very well in this role as far as the circumstances would permit. However, it could not protect local agencies from what appeared to be a persistent national confusion about what FEMA would offer and what the rules for its offerings would be. The information from FEMA was often contradictory and erratic. As a result, DCTED and the local agencies, including THA, were not as informative to their evacuee families as they would have liked to be about the resources available.

An example of this confusion was the FEMA housing certificate program. This program would have been THA's preferred resource for rental assistance because it would have reimbursed THA for the expense. However, the program did not clarify soon enough and remained unclear in how long its assistance would last. For these reasons, rather than delay assistance to families until it all sorted out, THA began issuing its own vouchers and used its own apartments, for which it will not receive reimbursement. In the end, only **twelve (12)** families received assistance from the FEMA housing program.

FEMA's communication directly with evacuee families was also confusing. FEMA often scheduled property damage assessments without notifying the actual homeowners. Katrina evacuees were overwhelmed with letters and requests from FEMA. Evacuees gave accounts of never-ending information that was inconsistent. The evacuees had much difficulty completing claim forms without explanation or intervention from the THA caseworker. The caseworker assisted the clients by faxing and or mailing supporting documentation to the appropriate FEMA office, and calling the national call center to talk directly with customer service representatives.

THA's Katrina caseworker worked directly with FEMA customer service representatives in Bothell, Washington in an effort to resolve complaints, respond to questions, or obtain clarification in a timely manner. The clients had numerous questions regarding eligibility for reimbursement, reimbursement checks, travel vouchers and expenses, benefits, hotel and motel stays vouchers, extensions for lodging, and essential costs. FEMA's constantly changing directives caused confusion and

increased work for state FEMA officials and CTED staff. Over and over again, FEMA announced deadlines and then retracted them. This also complicated the work of THA and its local partners.

It seemed apparent that FEMA did not adequately understand how to design or administer a local housing or housing assistance program. It lacks the pre-existing contacts and relationships that would have been helpful. HUD's experience in such matters would have been very valuable. For this reason, it was unfortunate that HUD was not more directly involved. As it was, HUD was very helpful as its role permitted by allowing and encouraging PHAs to exercise flexibility in the effort to adapt pre-existing housing programs to the crisis.

## **8.2 Importance of Local Partners and Collaboration**

THA learned two lessons in particular. **First**, housing and service assistance, to be effective, should be delivered and administered locally. To the extent that FEMA tried to provide assistance, its efforts were hard to understand and its assistance was hard to deliver.

The more effective assistance came through local organizations. They know their community well. They have well-established offices and community space to use for staging their efforts. Most importantly, they have the strong relationships with other providers and private landlords to allow for the necessary collaboration.

The **second** lesson concerns collaboration. It was essential. The entire effort required the coordinated participation of many local agencies and providers. Together, they provided a wide array of services from which THA's case manager could draw. This was important because the evacuees presented many interrelated needs. The Katrina experience demonstrated the principle that matching housing and services is often necessary if either is to work.

The experience showed that Tacoma and Pierce County has an array of well-connected and capable housing and service providers, both public and private, who are focused on their service mission and who recognize the same focus in their sister agencies. Our community is very fortunate in this way.

## **8.3 Limitations on THA as a Source of Emergency Housing and Services**

THA is not generally a source of emergency housing. Although it tried to serve that role for Katrina evacuees, THA's efforts were hampered by several problems or limitations. We wish we could have been more responsive. **First**, the housing and housing assistance it had to offer were governed by federal rules that were not conducive to speed or fast judgments about eligibility and tenant screening. THA notes that HUD was very accommodating in granting enhanced flexibility so that the programs worked as well as they could. Even so, dealing with THA presented the families with a considerable amount of paper shuffling and process that was incompatible with the crisis they faced. THA's requirement for verification delayed matters more than a week. Evacuees who received Housing Choice Vouchers often took several weeks to find a suitable rental unit. Completing the required inspection

of the unit and obtaining signatures on the contracts with landlords also took time. All this meant that emergency arrangements were critical. Hotel and motel vouchers provided by the Red Cross and FEMA were the primary source of emergency housing in Pierce County.

**Second**, THA does not usually have many vacant apartments to offer in an emergency. Its occupancy rate usually is close to 100%, with limited turnover.

**Third**, THA could not, and would not even if it could, dispense with its tenant screening criteria and criminal background checks. Tenant screening in particular was a challenge. Usually, THA has some basis to assess the suitability of applicants. Normally, applicants have an accessible tenant history. Even if they are homeless, they are usually coming from local shelters or transitional housing programs that THA knows well and that can assess their suitability. For the evacuees, however, THA had little ability to screen. Even though THA exercised more flexibility than usual, its screening efforts, such as they were, slowed the process down.

**Fourth**, THA was short of staff for this work. THA is barely staffed adequately to administer its normal programs. As any shelter or transitional housing program knows well, serving homeless, distressed families is labor-intensive work. The effort was a challenge for all of THA's staff. They performed very well, with all the advantages that come from extensive expertise, good community contacts, and a strong belief in the value of their work and their social justice mission. However, in the end, we could have used more staff.

The experience fortifies for THA an interest in expanding its program offerings to a wider portion of the housing continuum to include housing assistance better suited to emergencies. Such additional program offerings would better prepare THA for the next emergency.

#### **8.4 THA's Readiness for Local Disasters**

The experience was an occasion to reflect on how prepared THA would be for a comparable disaster in Tacoma. The Katrina spectacle made clear that, if a large scale disaster hit Tacoma, an earthquake or volcanic eruption, we may be on our own for prolonged periods of time, without adequate help coming from outside the area or from the national government. This experience has spurred THA to see to its own disaster planning and its coordination with city and county authorities.

## 9. CONCLUSION

In Tacoma and Pierce County, the main Katrina relief effort was organized at the state and local level. This probably happened because the national government's response was inadequate and slow. Local planning also had its advantages. Assistance is more effective if delivered by local agencies that know the community well. Collaboration is easier to arrange among agencies that have pre-existing relationships. Tacoma and Pierce County is fortunate in its array of capable service public and private agencies, churches, businesses and individuals that stepped up and performed. Their main limitation is an acute shortage of resources. Funding, either up front or as reimbursement, would have been another role the national government could have more fully performed. As it was, our local community used mainly local resources to respond to this crisis, which, although national in scope, lacked an adequate and adequately speedy national response.

The experience showed that THA's main housing programs are not easily suited to provide a fast response to people in such crisis. These programs, and the rules that govern them, rely on a highly structured application and waiting list process. For this reason, THA performs best as part of a collaboration with emergency and transitional housing providers and other service agencies. Again, THA is fortunate to have such capable sister service agencies in the area.

The local Katrina effort was also an occasion to reflect on the extent of unmet local need for housing and what that means when people needing help come from elsewhere. The Katrina Plan redirected scarce local resources to evacuees coming from the Gulf Coast. THA and others did this knowing that thousands of local families in Tacoma and Pierce County already need help. In this way, the THA contribution was at the expense of people on its waiting lists. Despite this local cost, THA and others contributed to the relief effort anyway. A final conclusory observation relates to why they did so and what it may reveal about values.

THA notes, with pride in its community, that the local political and service leadership, including the leadership of THA's Resident Advisory Board, strongly supported the relief effort. They did so with full acknowledgement that the effort meant redirecting resources from dire local needs. It is true that our community's willingness was not as fully tested as we would have been had the anticipated airlifts actually arrived. Nevertheless, the experience allowed the community and its leaders to display their values. They could not witness with any complacency the apparent destruction of a major American city, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of American families, many with minor children, most of them poor and persons of color, and the inadequacy of the federal government's response. Perhaps, in this way, the Plan was most notable for expressing what it means to be one nation.