Through My Eyes
Louisiana’s First Independent Evacuation Shelter Monitoring Report

Compiled by STAND
A grassroots project of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice
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To STAND’s courageous community leaders in Southern Louisiana, who demanded dignity in the face of great injustice. Your commitment and dedication to grass-roots organizing has secured the rights of Louisiana’s most vulnerable evacuees to dignity and conditions that meet humanitarian standards during mandatory hurricane evacuations.
“Access to a humane and comprehensive evacuation plan is a basic human right of all evacuees.”

Purpose

Evacuation can never be effective, human or legal without prioritizing community input and decision making in evacuation planning, preparation, and implementation. This grassroots monitoring report is one step towards building adequate transparency and accountability into Louisiana’s emergency preparedness and response.

The purpose of this report is to provide families of Southeast Louisiana with a comprehensive and honest assessment of Louisiana’s evacuation plan and sheltering readiness prior to a mandatory evacuation. The information comes from community assessors—90% were former evacuees in state run shelters during the 2008 mandatory Gustav evacuation.

STAND’s specific priorities were (1) to determine the readiness of the state of Louisiana’s 2009 Evacuation and Sheltering Plan; (2) to assess the humanitarian standards in place at ‘State-run’ Critical Transportation Needs Shelters (CTNS) and Medical Special Needs Shelters; and (3) to evaluate the state’s shelter management and organization.
Background

On August 4, 2009, STAND led an independent community assessment and inspection of three state-run shelter facilities. Community assessors accompanied the Louisiana’s Department of Social Services, the Governor’s Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, and other supportive state partners. The community assessment delegation, comprised of 90% former evacuees, along with their allies, conducted the shelter inspections in Monroe, Shreveport, and Alexandria.

Although disasters may be ‘natural’, preparation and government policies shape their impact on communities. In the midst of the mandatory evacuation during Hurricane Gustav, STAND’s independent shelter monitoring exposed how the poorest and most vulnerable evacuees suffered the most devastating effects of the disaster because of the state policy that directed them to the least prepared state shelters that failed to meet basic humanitarian standards.

Based on this experience, STAND committed to two main goals. First, STAND challenged the state’s practice of unequally disadvantaging the most-vulnerable communities with its evacuation policies. Second, STAND pressured the state to establish basic minimum standards for all evacuation shelters housing Louisiana evacuees.

The determination of STAND’s community leaders and organizers over the past year as been critical in exposing Louisiana’s lack of preparation and response, advancing the rights of evacuees to access humane and equal conditions and treatment, and ensuring the state adopts best-practice emergency shelter standards and conditions.

As discussed herein, the 2009 sheltering improvements, while significant, leave room for improvement, particularly in the areas of safety and security, shelter infrastructure, and environmental health. The improvements thus far evidence the critical importance of community inclusion and accountability that are necessary to ensure a humane and comprehensive evacuation and recovery plan for Louisiana’s costal residents.
INTRODUCTION

On September 1, 2008, STAND leaders took grassroots leadership to ensure that “Never Again” would state and local governments subject our communities to inhumane treatment and evacuation conditions. As residents, we have yet to experience a well-organized and well-managed evacuation even though Louisiana residents experience frequent and well known seasonal hurricanes and storms. This persistent failure of emergency preparedness and readiness continues to impact and disadvantage Louisiana’s poorest and most vulnerable residents. Since Hurricane Gustav, when STAND’s grassroots community monitoring exposed how the unconscionable failure of the state resulted in thousands of evacuees arriving to unprepared, ill-equipped and poorly managed state-run-shelter, STAND has been the primary independent community watch-dog influencing systematic change within Louisiana’s Evacuation planning.

As in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, discriminatory evacuation policies during Gustav revealed that the poorest and most-vulnerable families in the gulf-coast suffered the most and had the least access to humanitarian support. Immediately following the evacuation, STAND demanded and won the immediate reversal of Governor Jindal’s Department of Social Service’s discriminatory evacuation policy in September 2008. In addition, through community organizing and direct involvement, STAND has received the state’s commitment to adopt best-practice emergency shelter standards, expand human services, and ensure better treatment as guiding criteria at all emergency shelters. The immediate adoption of emergency shelter standards and guidelines was the first step in STAND’s struggle to ensure a dignified and humane evacuation for Louisiana most-vulnerable costal residents. All evacuees have a right to a humane and comprehensive evacuation plans and both policy changes and community inclusion are necessary to ensure that federal, state, and city governments fulfill their responsibilities to protect those basic rights.

On August 4, 2009, STAND conducted the first independent community inspection of evacuation shelters to verify the department of Social Service’s commitment to implement and improve Louisiana’s emergencies sheltering plan. While the community assessment delegations observed substantial sheltering improvements that follow community recommendations, there is significant room for improvement. “In My Eyes” outlines both the improvements and remaining shortcomings in key areas: safety and security, shelter infrastructure, and environmental health.

All evacuees have a right to humane and dignified treatment during hurricane evacuations, especially Louisiana’s most vulnerable residents. Louisiana residents’ access to an equitable, comprehensive and humane evacuation plan will ultimately rely on continued community involvement and participation in evacuation planning.
IMPROVEMENTS AT THE SAM’S CLUB WAREHOUSE SHELTER IN SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA

My name is Cythnia Parker, I am a leader of STAND, and I was a community assessor of the Sam’s Club Warehouse Shelter in Shreveport, Louisiana. I am long-time native New Orleanian who was unfortunately placed in the Sam’s Club warehouse shelter in Shreveport, Louisiana, with no access to a shower for five days while filthy portable toilets, located outside in rain, were the only alternatives. I had the unfortunate experience of having to use this particular shelter and was subjected to inhumane conditions and treatment during Gustav.

On August 4, 2009, I returned to Shreveport Louisiana to inspect and examine the Sam’s Club Warehouse shelter site. Immediately visible were 5-inch cement blocks surrounding the open parking lot to keep people off the shelter site. In addition, I saw superficial changes like waxed flooring and newly painted walls. However, my priorities were set on more principled improvements.

The first major improvement was an on-site maintenance crew designated for round-the-clock cleaning of the portable toilets. There were also hot running water and portable showers with wrap around maintenance. Clean, accessible, and hot showers are very important and something the state failed to provide during Gustav. For this reason, all shelter sites can now be prepared to operate within 72-hours following an active hurricane formation within the Gulf.

Secondly, the state has set the maximum capacity of the shelter at half the number of evacuees placed there during Gustav. This is really important because it opens up space for people to eat, children to play, and for the state to provide the necessary human services. I was happy to see that sleeping space will also be according to family structure. For example, sleeping space for single adults will be separate from sleeping space for families with children, and separate from sleeping space for the elderly.

The third critical improvement was the designated handicap and senior-citizens area. This section specially designated for the elderly was equipped with special cots and wheel chairs and newly built indoor showering facilities custom built for the elderly and mobility impaired. A twenty-four hour medical center that includes staffing of 3 doctors, 4 nurses, and 4 paramedics has been located next to the section designated for the elderly. For me, these modifications show a good faith effort on behalf of the shelter support team. Finally, special needs evacuees that reside at the Sam’s Club Warehouse shelter site will have indoor access to showers and bathrooms that are positioned near a medical unit with 24 hour staffing.

In addition to minor facility upgrades-- microwave ovens, a refrigerator, 4-6 baby changing stations, phone banks, and an outdoor canopy over bathroom facilities-- the state had also equipped the Sam’s Club Warehouse shelter with all of the human services included in STAND’s demands. These are necessary to ensure better treatment of evacuees during a mandatory evacuation.

For me, both the planning and upgrades appeared to be carefully thought out. While warehouses are never the ideal setting for sheltering, I would give this warehouse shelter a grade of B+. A smooth and well-organized shelter management team combined with the improvements in the structure show the capacity to house evacuees in an orderly, safe, and comfortable environment.
COMMUNITY EVALUATION OF ACCENT CENTER SHELTER IN MONROE, LOUISIANA

My name is Tamar Mcfarlane, and I am an organizer with STAND. Until evacuation and recovery become a tangible human right, the horrific conditions experienced during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav will continue, and this will continue to displace and deepen the poverty level of the Gulf Coast’s poorest and most-vulnerable residents. During the Gustav evacuation, I joined hundreds of evacuees who collected signatures on petitions and organized to expose the horrific conditions and treatment of evacuees at Louisiana’s state-run emergency shelters and educate Governor Jindal and his staff. The immediate results were successful at re-prioritizing Louisiana’s shelter standards. Based on this work, STAND committed to independently monitor the state’s evacuation and readiness plan to ensure the needs and rights of most vulnerable communities be prioritized in future hurricane seasons. Our community assessment on August 4, 2009 revealed the Accent Center shelter to be the most practical and family-friendly site.

_The Accent Center respected evacuees’ rights to know shelter staff’s responsibilities, rules, and procedures._ Upon arrival, STAND leaders were escorted to a designated waiting area that was equipped with chairs, wheelchairs, and walkers to accommodate the mobility needs of all evacuees. There, we received a general welcome and orientation to shelter’s rules, expectations, and management structure. An organizational chart with each staff’s responsibility and authority was posted in the facility. STAND sees this as an essential improvement to residents’ ability to know and hold shelter staff accountable.

_The Accent Center respected evacuees’ rights to know where relatives are located as well as the ability to directly communicate with loved ones._ The Accent Center shelter had a designated registration area that was equipped with wireless internet access computer system. During registration, each evacuee’s general information will be stored and electronically tracked in computer data system, which will be accessible at each shelter site. The electronic tracking system will improve shelter staff’s ability to respond to residents’ information requests as well as medical emergencies. In addition, several phone-booth stations were installed to provide brief, free calls for evacuees to locate and communicate with family separated in the evacuation process.

_The Accent Center respected evacuees’ rights to human services and care to relieve anxiety experience during evacuation was upheld._ At the Accent Center, a designated child care center was ready and fully equipped to service the needs of parents with children 1-5 years of age. The child care center was enclosed and supervised by a certified child care agency. In addition, a youth recreational and movie room was designated and equipped to provide indoor activities for youth 6-17 years old. Finally, 4-6 small adult lounges were sectioned off and equipped with basic television and table-games. Television and radio are critical to ensure each resident’s ability to monitor local and national news and weather.
COMMUNITY EVALUATION OF THE ALEXANDRIA CIVIC CENTER SHELTER

My name is Darnell Parker, and I am a STAND organizer. I came to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help ensure the fair and just recovery of New Orleans’ most devastated families. During the mandatory evacuation for Hurricane Gustav, I monitored more than eight shelter sites in Memphis, Tennessee. Shockingly, the majority of the Memphis complaints were minor and sharply contrasted with the inhumane conditions and treatment of Louisiana’s state-run shelters in Louisiana.

Our community inspection revealed that the Alexandria Civic Center is the only state-of-the-art facility designed and built to withstand hurricane force winds and provide a comprehensive in-house emergency service and care system. In fact, it is the first hurricane-proof shelter in southern Louisiana. The Civic Center was designed and constructed by Louisiana State University for a tall price of $27 million dollars. With large movable partitions, a neighboring animal shelter, and adequate ventilation, and back-up generator, our inspection revealed Alexandria Civic Center to be a sound building.

Near the entrance, a clear organizational chart outlining each of the shelter’s staff and his responsibilities was posted and visible. We were welcomed and moved from the check-in station, past the computer and distribution room, into a fully equipped bathroom facility. Both male and female facilities had a dozen bathroom and shower stalls that were created for general and handicap use. Entirely separate, another bathroom facility was available for special and medical needs evacuees—especially equipped for highly vulnerable medical patients.

Next, we went into the largest sleeping and living space. It was clearly and appropriately marked to break up the general population according to family structure and needs. Single adults were grouped separately from families with children, who were also separated from the elderly. Recreational areas were also grouped according to age and surrounded the edge of the sleeping area. This sheltering plan suggests a mindful consideration of the community’s needs and comfort. This layout was a key re-adjustment from the Gustav sheltering plan that was requested and prioritized by STAND leaders.

The Civic Center has special capacity to serve special medical needs evacuees (SMN). A central nursing station was located in SMN’s sleeping and living space. The SMN area will be staffed with specialize medical doctors and nurses. We also witnessed other important health precautions. Ultra-violet lights were installed to curb air-borne bacteria and viruses in the SMN area. Similar to an emergency room, a staffed intake and triage area was set for the general population. A forced ventilation system was sufficient in design to alleviate common airborne contamination and largely reducing serious outbreaks of influenza. Finally, a communication/information space was available for residents to track information about relatives, hometown conditions, and status to help alleviate understandable anxiety STAND members witnessed and felt during prior evacuations.
SUMMARY OF KEY SHELTERING IMPROVEMENTS OBSERVED BY COMMUNITY ASSESSORS

On-site Human and Emergencies Services
- Portable showers with hot water to service both men and women (at a rate of 1 unit per 25 evacuees).
- Child care services for families with children staffed by certified child care providers.
- Hot and cold nutritional meals with special meals available for evacuees who have diabetes, high blood pressure, and other special needs. Special food is also available for infants.
- Medical service area staffed by 4 registered nurses, 4 paramedics, and 2 doctors, twenty-four hours a day/ seven days a week.

Organization of Shelter Space and Staff
- Posting of shelter organizational chart outlining titles and responsibilities for staff.
- Sectioned off and coordinated sleeping/living areas for single adults, families with children, and the elderly.
- Distinct areas for dining, recreation, and sleeping.

Shelter Sanitation and Cleanliness
- Hand-washing station with hot water (at a rate of 1 unit per 20 people).
- Over-all reduction in the maximum number of evacuees assigned per shelter.
- Twenty-four hour maintenance service for portable toilets and showers.
- 4- 6 infant changing stations per shelter.

Information and Communication
- 4-6 phone stations spread out within the shelter facility.
- Electronic evacuee tracking system and Internet service.
- Additions of electric outlets throughout the shelter facility.
- Access to television and radio.
- Information board with daily updates.
SUMMARY OF KEY AREAS NEEDING ADDITIONAL IMPROVEMENT AS OBSERVED BY COMMUNITY ASSESSORS

Safety and Security
• Despite the state of Louisiana’s clear executive authority and responsibility for safety and security during emergency sheltering, there is no transparent inter-agency agreement governing roles and accountability for cooperating local and federal law enforcement. Further clarity is necessary about responsibility for safety and security and jurisdiction throughout evacuation, including a public Memorandum of Understanding between all partnering law enforcement agencies.

• While check-points and designated security areas may be appropriate to ensure safety and security, law enforcement must work with the community to carry out this function with appropriate respect and civility. Dialogue, training, and planning are critical to avoid the militarize environment created by the 2008 plan. Failure to address these concerns raises stress for evacuees, deters public trust, and fails to ensure the safety and security of evacuees during a mandatory evacuation as shown during mandatory evacuations after Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav.

Shelter Infrastructure
• The use of these warehouse facilities compromises the consistency of the state’s emergencies shelter standards. Abandoned warehouse facilities are not the safe and efficient hurricane shelter space.
• Large open warehouse facilities lack the flexibility and infrastructure necessary to provide comprehensive emergency relief and support service. While the Sam’s Club warehouse shelter has been substantially enhanced with costly infrastructure modifications, it still falls short of accepted best practices for medical and special needs care, secure child care, and minimum privacy for nursing mothers. The facility was still under construction at the time of the community assessment with incomplete indoor bathroom flooring, padded floors in the child care area, and general household cleaning.

Environmental Health
• While increased cleanliness will help limit public health threats, mass warehouse shelters lack the adequate control of indoor temperature and ventilation necessary to prevent the spread of air borne bacteria and viruses. The state should immediately conduct an independent rapid assessment of mass shelter environmental risks and make both short and long term plans necessary to ensure the public health and well-being of evacuees.

• With the specific risk of H1N1 influenza (swine flu), it is especially critical that the state update shelter standards to include environmental and bio-technological upgrades that ensure environmental health, including forced ventilation, HVCH, and back-up generator systems to ensure these systems function.
We STAND Upon Six Rights to a Dignified Evacuation

1. **The right to complete and transparent planning and preparation prior to Hurricane Season.** Evacuees have a right to know the short and long term plan for sheltering and humanitarian relief including the location of shelters (both in-state and out of state) and the basic standards that set conditions and treatment of evacuees. Evacuees also have a right to know local options for protection in the city and the responsibility of city, parish, and state officials.

2. **The right to full inclusion and community participation in decision making regarding evacuation planning and preparation.** Evacuees know best how to articulate and assist their families’ needs. Many mistakes were made during Gustav that could have been prevented if evacuees were included in the planning and decision making. While the sheltering plans have improved, important work remains on state plans for safety and security, shelter infrastructure, and environmental health.

3. **The right to humane conditions and treatment during and after a hurricane.** Disaster relief must be provided for all victims despite a person economic, race, criminal background and immigration status and relief must meet accepted, basic humanitarian standards.

4. **The right to humane security and safety services from all law enforcement officers and disaster relief staff.** Evacuees should be treated with dignity and respect—as human beings. Evacuating and trying to survive does not make evacuees criminals, and they should not be treated that way. All law enforcement, shelter staff, and relief agencies must take responsible for protecting evacuees both during and after hurricanes.

5. **The right to community health and environmental standards within all disaster facilities and servicing stations.** This includes waiting, transportation, servicing centers, and shelters. Transportation must include ventilation that meets health code, adequate personal space, basic sanitary resources, and bathrooms. Holding and waiting sites should have hydration, bathrooms, and onsite medical personal.

6. **The right to transparency, dialogue, and direct accountability with all officials governing the system.** Evacuees must be guaranteed the right to transparency, dialogue, and accountability from the agencies involved planning, preparing and implementing the state and local government’s responsibilities. No evacuee should have to use the media and public protest to open dialogue with the Governor and other responsibility authorities.
STAND’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Evacuation can never be effective, human or legal without prioritizing community input and decision making in evacuation planning, preparation, and implementation.

Never again will we allow our families and Louisiana’s poorest and most-vulnerable evacuees to arrive at warehouses converted into emergencies shelters lacking the most basic service and infrastructure. STAND believes it is the community’s responsibility to hold the government accountable for providing humane, fair, and equitable conditions. This independent monitoring report is the first step in a process to build transparency and accountability into Louisiana’s emergency preparedness and response. While some substantial sheltering improvements were evident during STAND’s tour of model shelter facilities, more community inclusion and accountability are necessary to ensure a humane and comprehensive evacuation and recovery plan for Louisiana’s coastal residents.

STAND’S recommendations:

• In the event of a mandatory evacuation during 2009, STAND recommends Alexandria Civic Center as the most equipped and prepared medical special needs shelter site and the Monroe’s Accent building, as the most family friendly CTNS shelter site in Louisiana.

• The State of Louisiana should end the use of warehouse facilities and direct funding towards adapting existing public buildings and new shelter site construction. The ongoing utilization of private abandoned warehouse facilities as sheltering sites impedes the state’s ability to develop and implement comprehensive evacuation plans that are reflective of the long-term human and ecological needs.

• The state of Louisiana should legislate and enforce national and state best practice guideline and criteria for selecting hurricane evacuation shelters and accepted emergencies shelter standards for those shelters.

• The state should immediately assess and survey existing public buildings regarding their suitability for emergency sheltering as well as survey and assess new construction sites that are closer, environmental sound, and allow for green construction.

• To ensure the safety and well being of evacuees, Louisiana should end all existing security contracts with active military forces (NG) and should prioritize the use of military police and local law-enforcement, which are trained for civic and crowd engagement. Additional community consultation and planning around security issues is critical.

• The New Orleans City Council, Mayor, and the State should commit to holding a public meeting with FEMA, Red-Cross, local, and state officials to assess the critical needs of New Orleans’ residents after a mandatory evacuation. Immediate procedures and policy should be put in place for eviction prevention, utility assistance, job stability, and other critical issues identified by the community.
STAND is a grassroots community organization that grew out of a group of elders, farmers, skilled workers, and fathers who had formerly experienced or were experiencing homelessness in New Orleans. STAND arose from the tent cities and overcrowded shelters in New Orleans when 7 people, frustrated with broken solutions, began to meet and recognize that the most viable solution is within the community. STAND seeks to create affordable housing and safe public spaces for our displaced families and communities. STAND believes unity and self-determination are the most viable solution for devastated communities in New Orleans. STAND is a grassroots organizing project of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice.

The New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice is a membership organization that was founded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in response to the stark exclusion of African Americans and the brutal exploitation of immigrants within the new Gulf Coast racial economy. Workers’ Center members include African-American and immigrant workers. The Center organizes workers across lines of race and industry to advance racial justice and build the power and participation of poor and working class people of color in the post-Katrina landscape.

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