



Never Again

Lessons from Louisiana's Gustav Evacuation

COMPILED BY

STAND

*A Grassroots Project of the New Orleans
Workers' Center for Racial Justice*

AS HURRICANE GUSTAV APPROACHED AND MANDATORY EVACUATIONS

were beginning, members of STAND, a grassroots project of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, and Workers' Center staff began outreach to New Orleans' residents waiting to board buses at the New Orleans Greyhound terminals. Committed to documenting the reality of the evacuation, STAND/Workers' Center members and staff themselves evacuated to cities with large numbers of evacuated residents to support the residents in their struggle for a just and humane evacuation and return. STAND/ Workers' Center members and staff conducted onsite assessments of twelve shelters in three states including three of the four Louisiana state-run warehouse shelters.

This report summarizes information gathered from hundreds of interviews with evacuated residents through that work. This report was compiled and written by Tamar McFarlane, Saket Soni, and JJ Rosenbaum of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice.

For the courageous residents who were forced into Louisiana's state-run warehouse shelters and who even as they experience great indignity, had the courage to take a stand.

“We’re not asking for silver and gold, just to
be treated like human beings.”

*Young woman from New Orleans leading a prayer outside the Sam’s Club
shelter in Shreveport, Louisiana after residents exposed horrific conditions to the media*

Table of Contents

Preface	6
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	9
What Was Louisiana’s Differential Treatment Sheltering Policy During the Gustav Evacuation?	11
Who Was Impacted by the Policy and How?	13
Overview of the State-Run Sam’s Club Warehouse Shelter Shreveport, Louisiana	15
Overview of the State-Run Wal-Mart Warehouse Shelter Bastrop, Louisiana	16
Recommendations: What Changes Do the Affected Residents Want?	18
Shreveport Shelter Conditions Assessment	20
Bastrop Shelter Conditions Assessment	22

Preface

*By William P. Quigley, Loyola University New Orleans College of Law,
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Unless serious substantive changes are immediately made in the evacuation process we saw in Gustav, our community absolutely risks repeating the disasters of Katrina.

Katrina showed the world the consequences of not providing for the elderly, the disabled and the working poor of New Orleans facing possible disaster in a humane safe manner consistent with human dignity. The result was widespread death and continued displacement of tens of thousands of people even today.

In the response to Gustav, all levels of government showed that they are starting to learn some of the lessons of Katrina. Certainly, if the Gustav evacuation had happened during Katrina, many lives would have been saved.

However the very serious defects in the Gustav evacuation process have clearly damaged the potential for all future evacuations. The result is that a large percentage of people who evacuated for Gustav have made it clear that they will not cooperate with a government called evacuation in the future. It is time for government to clearly and honestly identify the serious defects in the Gustav evacuation, take public responsibility for those defects, and make vastly improved public plans for future evacuations.

This report details many of the problems that undercut the Gustav evacuation. Some will ask, by what standard does any group challenge a government effort at evacuation and shelter under extreme circumstances. The only legitimate response is the golden rule, which is one of the fundamental principles of justice and human rights. Were the elderly, the disabled and working families evacuated and sheltered in ways that other members of the community would accept and appreciate for our sisters and brothers, and children and mothers? The examples below testify that this threshold of treating our fellow humans with respect and dignity was not met.

This report by the Stand, a grassroots project of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, makes a big contribution towards an honest review of the many problems occurring in the Gustav evacuation.

Now it is up to our community, particularly our local, state and federal officials to respond and to do so before another hurricane approaches.

Some have already said that the elderly and disabled and working families do not deserve anything more than they received. Such an attitude displays either a lack of knowledge of what people went through, or a cavalier disregard for the human rights and human dignity of our sisters and brothers. Failure to learn from the mistakes of Gustav will force our community to pay too high a price when the next serious disaster comes.

Our community must join together, take an honest look at what occurred and immediately institute serious changes. This report provides the factual basis for immediate change and the response must come immediately.

* * *

Executive Summary

Never Again *Failures of the Gustav Evacuation*

This report exposes Louisiana's differential treatment sheltering policy which directs that in disasters, the state shall segregate evacuees relying on city/ state transportation in state-run warehouse shelters separate from evacuees using their own cars. Pursuant to this policy, the state advisory system directs self-transporting evacuees to separate parish, Red Cross, and church shelters with better conditions. Those who evacuate by bus are primarily the residents who do not have the economic means (or the cars) to self-evacuate, including homeless residents, public housing residents, low-wage workers, low-income renters, and their families — almost all African American.

This report's findings are based on assessments of the state-run warehouse shelters and extensive interviews of hundreds of affected residents. The findings expose startling inequity. In the Gustav evacuation, the state's differential treatment policy subjected the most vulnerable state residents to extremely inhumane shelter conditions. In each of the four state-run warehouse shelters, over a thousand evacuees were housed in a single large one-room space. Women, infants, children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled were all using the same space, without privacy, and sharing the same bathrooms — outdoor portable toilets. They had no access to running water inside the facilities. The only showers — until close to the end of the evacuations — were the portable toilets outside, in which mothers were washing themselves and their babies with bottled water. Residents had limited access to medical care, and no access to counselors or to news from the state about the hurricane and its aftermath.

KEY FINDINGS

As Gustav approached, the poorest communities had no choice but to place themselves in the hands of the state at their most vulnerable moment. They trusted that Louisiana's plan for evacuation, sheltering, and return was designed for their safety. Communities counted on the state for access to humanitarian relief in a time of disaster.

The state's plan achieved the very opposite result. The Department of Social Services sheltering policy had profoundly inequitable impacts on the poorest evacuees — blocking them from humanitarian relief. The policy forced those who were worst off into the worst shelter conditions.

The inequitable impacts persisted well beyond the disaster. The state policy drove residents into cumulative disadvantage: over the course of seven days, residents became poorer and sicker as a direct result of shelter treatment and conditions. As a result, residents returned home to New Orleans in greater economic disadvantage and more vulnerable than when they left.

In large part these were residents who were already disadvantaged as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Three years after the breach of the levees, these residents were still profoundly experiencing displacement and poverty as the result of the failed governmental response to Katrina and its aftermath.

These residents are now deeply unwilling to trust the state or to participate in future evacuations. Almost without exception, residents expressed their preference to risk staying even as a hurricane approaches rather than to evacuate into the deplorable and humiliating conditions they had to face during Gustav.

CONCLUSIONS

Louisiana Governor Jindal and DSS Sec. Williamson should revoke the differential treatment sheltering policy, apologize for the suffering it caused vulnerable residents, and direct DSS to work with directly affected communities and their representatives to develop a new sheltering policy.

The state's new shelter plan must be based on principles of *inclusion, access, and equity* for poor and working class African Americans and for all communities in Louisiana.

The state must **include the directly affected communities** — those who have the hardest time evacuating — in creating

the plan for shelters during disaster.

A state shelter plan must **give the hardest-hit communities equal access** to humanitarian relief during every phase of disaster — because they need it the most.

The state must ensure that the policy is **equitable**. The present differential treatment shelter policy plays out to proactively disadvantage poor and working class African Americans — whether by intention, or by impact. The state must instead adopt an **equitable disaster policy that proactively advantages the poor** by prioritizing them at the precise time that they are most vulnerable.

Introduction

“I blame the State. And I blame Governor Jindal for putting me in this place unfit for human beings — unfit even for a dog . . . Three years after Katrina, this is Katrina all over again.”

Dimetra Boykins, New Orleans' resident evacuated to Shreveport

On August 29, 2008, three years to the day that Katrina made landfall, the state of Louisiana promulgated a differential treatment sheltering policy that directed the poorest evacuees to the worst shelter conditions. As a result, thousands of poor and working-class African American residents of New Orleans were evacuated into a public health disaster. The policy prescribed that residents evacuating by car — “self-transporting evacuees” — would be directed to “general population” shelters run by the parishes, the Red Cross, or churches. But residents evacuating by bus would bypass these shelters and be taken to “large capacity” state-run warehouse shelters. Those evacuating by bus were primarily those residents who did not have the economic means (or the cars) to self-evacuate. They included homeless residents, public housing residents, low-wage workers, low-income renters, and their families.

The Louisiana Department of Social Services (“DSS”) policy, quietly issued on August 29, 2008, was lost amidst the din of news reports projecting a category 5 hurricane and Mayor Nagin’s statements calling Gustav “the mother of all storms” and warnings that there were still cracks in the levees. Residents listened and scrambled to evacuate. Without the means to evacuate themselves, and faced with curfews, arrests, and a hurricane if they stayed, residents from the poorest communities had no choice but to put their faith and their bodies in the hands of those charged with guaranteeing their safety — Mayor Nagin, Governor Jindal and Secretary Chertoff of the Department of Homeland Security.

By Saturday evening the first buses rolled up to the state-run warehouse shelters in Louisiana and horrified the evacuating residents. Over the next seven days, they were treated to deplorable shelter conditions, degrading treatment, and unbearable risks to their health and sanity. In each of the state-run warehouse shelters, over a thousand evacuees were housed in a single large one-room space. Women, infants, children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled were all using the same space, without privacy and sharing the same bathrooms — outdoor portable toilets. Evacuated residents had no access to running water inside the facilities. The only showers — until close to the end of the evacuation — were the portable toilets outside, in which mothers were washing themselves and their babies with bottled water. Residents had limited access to medical care and no access to counselors or to news from the state about the hurricane’s effects on their homes. And in at least one shelter, in Bastrop, Louisiana, local police and national guardsman subjected residents to such inhumane treatment that mothers fear their children are permanently scarred from the experience.

Evacuees responded by pleading with shelter staff for help, and when it did not come, by fighting for their own health and dignity. They protected their children, demanded more infrastructure, called the media, held press conferences, collected almost two thousand petition signatures, and contacted local mayors and state government officials. Across the shelters their message was the same: Would you stay here? Would you evacuate into these conditions? Could you sleep here? As the state continued to remain unresponsive to vulnerable people in nightmarish conditions, the evacuated residents spoke out to ensure that the impact of the state’s failed policy was made public.

The impact of the state’s policy did not stop at seven days of indignity and humiliation. The real impact was the cumulative disadvantage that evacuated residents faced by the end of their stay in the shelter. This cumulative impact was profound. Residents in the shelters were already economically disadvantaged when they evacuated. Most were still reeling from the governmental failure to restore New Orleanians to their homes and livelihoods in the aftermath of Katrina. The residents getting on the buses Saturday morning had already spent the three years since Katrina grappling with displacement, homelessness, and poverty. By the end of their evacuation, on Sunday night, the experience in the shelters had driven them into a far greater level of economic and physical disadvantage than when they had left their homes. The state’s lack of preparation and infrastructure in the shelters forced them dig into their own limited resources and spend their money on basic necessities they would otherwise have spent on rent upon their return. The cumulative

economic disadvantage was compounded by the fact they left the shelters stripped of physical and emotional health. Sick residents left the warehouse shelters even sicker, healthy adults left the warehouse shelters sick, and parents left the warehouse shelters with children who had picked up serious illnesses.

This report bears witness to the horrific conditions faced by residents evacuated by the state of Louisiana during Hurricane Gustav, the policy directing the most vulnerable residents to these inhumane shelters, and the courageous actions of evacuees to fight for dignity. Residents now demand that Governor Jindal revoke the State's differential treatment policy, apologize to the affected residents, and direct the DSS to work with affected residents and their advocates to create a new sheltering policy that prioritizes access, inclusion, and equity for all state residents. Such a policy should proactively advantage the poorest evacuees. Never again should the state adopt policies that specifically disadvantage its most vulnerable residents — poor and working class African Americans. Never again should state humanitarian policy leave residents struggling for the most basic necessities of their families — housing, food, medical care — because they used their last dollars to purchase basic supplies to survive the evacuation. Never again.

What was Louisiana's Differential Treatment Sheltering Policy During the Gustav Evacuation?

“We got on the buses even though we didn't have any idea where we were going. No one would tell us- but somebody must have known. Even the bus drivers acted like they were sworn to secrecy even though they knew where to drive to.”

Charleston Preston, West Bank resident evacuated to Bastrop

From the moment they arrived at the Greyhound station, evacuating residents wanted to know where they were going. Understandably, as they fled their homes and their city with limited personal effects, these were critical assurances in a time of crisis and vulnerability. But none of the volunteers, staff, bus drivers, or even the media would tell the tens of thousands of residents where the departing buses were going. Even as they rode on buses for as long as a day, residents couldn't convince even the bus drivers to divulge their intended destinations. Surely someone knew where the buses were going.

Louisiana's DSS knew very well the destinations of the buses. As the state agency with the responsibility for emergency sheltering including “location readiness, facility management and staffing, distribution of comfort and relief supplies, feeding, and first aid ...” DSS had been refining a specific plan for evacuating and sheltering state residents since 2006.¹ The Gustav evacuation revealed that the state's plan not only involved differential treatment of the most vulnerable residents but inequitably directed them into the most inhumane shelter conditions.

In 2006, the state first announced intentions to segregate those evacuees requiring transportation assistance in separate state-run warehouse shelters, publishing on the DSS website that, “for the first time, the state will have its own state-run shelters to accommodate evacuees who need state transportation assistance.”² Those residents who did not have cars that were reliable enough for an evacuation— mostly working poor, African American communities — were distinguished from “self-transporting evacuees” who would evacuate in their own vehicles and be treated differently.³ The state evacuation advisory system would direct evacuees using state transportation to state-run warehouse shelters, while self-transporting evacuees (those with their own cars) would be directed to separate shelters run by the Red Cross, churches, and parishes. At that time, DSS noted that it was identifying spaces for the state-run warehouse shelters. DSS's announcement notes that, “a vacant building doesn't automatically translate into a potential shelter site. Certain requirements beyond mere space are examined such as the structural soundness and safety of the building (wind load and elevation, for example, are assessed.) The physical resources of the building also are assessed, such as bathrooms, as well as its location.”⁴ No information was published about why the state sought out “warehouse” facilities. By 2008, however, the state had identified four warehouse sites that could house up to 9,600 people total.⁵

On August 29, 2008, on the third anniversary of Katrina, the state announced its policies for the Gustav evacuation, based on the 2006 plan. “The state will operate large-capacity sheltering facilities to house citizens who are evacuated out of harm's way via city/state assisted transportation,” stated the DSS press release.⁶ Thus the buses were directed to the four state-run warehouse shelters in Louisiana as well as shelters in other states specifically designated as “critical transportation needs shelters.”⁷ Self-transporting evacuees were separately directed to the nearest “general capacity shelters.” These general capacity shelters included parish-run shelters and those run by parish partners included the

1 Louisiana Department of Social Services' Press Release, “State Gears Up Shelter Plans for Upcoming Storm Season, Urges Residents to Plan Ahead,” May 18, 2006, <http://www.ohsep.louisiana.gov/archive/shelplans.htm>, (last visited Sept. 14, 2008).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 September 11, 2008 Public Records Act Response from DSS. On file with the Workers' Center.

6 Louisiana Department of Social Services' Press Release, “DSS Provides Primer on Emergency Support Function 6: Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing and Human Services,” August 29, 2006, http://www.dss.state.la.us/Documents/DSS/Hurricane_Documents/Gustav_fs_sheltering.pdf (last visited Sept. 24, 2008).

7 Ibid.

Red Cross and churches.⁸ The state's shelter-information points directed all evacuees to these shelters segregated by the evacuees' type of transportation.⁹ What residents on buses would soon learn was that this differential treatment policy based on transportation, in effect, ensured that the poorest residents were segregated and alone bore the burden of the ill-equipped warehouse shelters.

As the Gustav evacuation of residents relying on city/state transportation began on Saturday, state officials should have known that the state-run warehouse shelters were desperately unprepared for human habitation. National guardsmen arrived on Thursday August 28, and DSS employees arrived on Friday, August 29 to prepare the state-run shelters. It must have been apparent to them, as it would soon be to the over one thousand evacuated residents directed to each shelter, that the warehouses were simply not ready as shelters for human beings. At that time, the state-run warehouse shelters lacked even the most basic provisions — showers, toilets, basic medical provisions for the arriving babies, elderly, and diabetic residents, and basic privacy for changing clothes, nursing, and medical procedures. While the state's 2006 communication suggested that "the resources of the building also are assessed, such as bathrooms" would be a factor in site selection, on-site shelter assessments show that at least three of the four warehouse shelters lacked even the basic provisions of indoor toilet facilities as late as a week into the Gustav evacuation.¹⁰

Although the inadequacies of the state-run warehouse shelters must have been in plain view to national guardsmen and DSS staff, the state of Louisiana did not alter its plan. For example, DSS could have directed the first departing buses to Red Cross or other shelters that were already prepared while taking the additional 24-48 hours to improve conditions at the state-run warehouse shelters. But it did not do so — perhaps with the implicit knowledge that while the warehouse shelters could be made more humane, they would never reach a basic adequacy standard in time.

Although not publicized to affected residents and publicly softened by the bureaucratic label "critical needs transportation shelters," the state's choices created the obvious result: many of the state's most vulnerable residents — those still fighting to recover after Katrina — were sent to the most unprepared facilities. By the end of the week, the residents experienced the physical, economic, and emotional scars of the state's failed policy.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Louisiana Department of Social Services' Press Release, "State Gears Up Shelter Plans for Upcoming Storm Season, Urges Residents to Plan Ahead," May 18, 2006; see e.g. Shreveport and Bastrop Shelter Assessments included herein.

Who Was Impacted by the Policy and How?

The people who lined up at the Greyhound Station to take the “city- or state- assisted transportation” had no other path out of harm’s way as Gustav approached. Residents who needed the buses were the ones who did not have cars and who were too poor to be “self-transporting evacuees.” Why did they need the buses? These were the residents who were still disadvantaged from governmental and public policy failure after Katrina. Three years later, the impacts of Hurricane Katrina— displacement and poverty— were still profoundly affecting poor peoples’ lives as they lined up to at the New Orleans’ Greyhound station on August 29, 2008. And they were the ones who ultimately ended up in the “critical transportation needs shelters” examined in this report.

Charleston Preston stood in line with his son and partner. He describes how his life changed after Katrina:
I was going to school when Katrina hit — I was attending school and working to take care of my family. After Katrina hit, there was too much going on with getting back. I dropped out of school and just continued to work to take care of my son.

As Gustav approached, Charleston, his girlfriend and two-year old son were still saving for a security deposit on an apartment in New Orleans. He scrambled to evacuate, and was taken by bus to a state-run warehouse shelter in Bastrop, Louisiana.

Christine McCann also stood in line. A mother who was evacuated on a state bus to state-run warehouse shelter in Shreveport, she echoed the story of many residents:
Since Katrina I’ve been supporting my family paycheck to paycheck without any cushion. We’ve been making it month to month, but we didn’t have enough money for a reliable car and insurance. I didn’t have much emergency cushion. So we relied on state transportation when they issued evacuation warnings for Gustav.

Dimetra Boykins of Uptown describes why she got in line:
On August 29th, my children came home with a letter and flyer from their school about evacuation. I had no other means to evacuate with my family. I did not have a vehicle or a hotel reserved. If I had a car, I would not have to rely on the city bus.

For Charleston, Christine, Dimetra, and thousands like them, state buses were the last and only resort in a mandatory evacuation. They had the most basic of expectations — to protect the lives and health of their families and to spend as little time as possible away from their homes.

Unfortunately, the state’s differential treatment policy not only robbed them of their dignity and health, it left them significantly worse off financially after the Gustav evacuation. The impact of the state’s sheltering plan was clear: it cumulatively disadvantaged their families in the struggle for stability upon return.

Because they had to spend the next month’s rent money on food and other basic supplies, evacuated residents from state-run warehouse shelters returned home with a sense of dread about the long term impact of Gustav on their families’ housing, medical care, and basic needs. Christine voiced the concerns of many residents when she explained:
Many residents, including myself, had to spend our rent money to get by [in the shelter]. I had to buy food and bathing stuff for over a week for my family . . . My landlord won’t look at my receipts and say, ‘I understand what happened.’ The whole time I was worried whether I would be put out with my husband and son when I went back because I was using money that was meant for rent. Now I have two weeks to find rent money, and I do not know where it will come from. This evacuation could leave me homeless.

Charleston explains that medical bills from sicknesses related to the inhumane conditions in the Shreveport shelter are putting severe pressure on his family’s finances.
My son got sick, so sick that since we returned he has been in the hospital. . . Now I have a bill that I have to figure out how to pay because they evacuated my family into such a horrible facility.

The state’s differential treatment policy in effect forces the cost of the evacuation plan back onto those residents least able to bear it. Residents evacuating from disaster should be protected from other burdensome costs of evacuation by the quality of humanitarian assistance provided at the shelters where they are sent. This is real humanitarian assistance —

evacuated residents are able to return and move forward in rebuilding their lives. Under the DSS Gustav sheltering policy, however, the poorest residents who have to rely on the state for transportation are sent to the shelters where the state's failure forces them to finance their own emergency plan. Thus they spend money owed for next month's bills keeping their families safe.

The cost does not stop there. An additional cost — and a profound one — is the collective loss of faith in government-assisted evacuation. Charleston and Dimetra voice a widespread consensus that residents will not evacuate again without assurances of humane conditions:

If I had known, I would never have gone. The shelters were not equipped and not prepared. I do not know what I would do if I had to evacuate again, but I will not bring my children into a facility with no bathroom and no shower — where we aren't treated with basic respect. — Dimetra

In case the Mayor and Governor don't know, people are not going to line up again and evacuate. The shelter was not fit for human being much less animals. [The shelter was] so degrading; I will never evacuate to a shelter like this again. I'd rather stay home. — Charleston

The cumulative disadvantage faced by the most vulnerable residents further prejudices the reconstruction and general stability of the city. Government policies should support residents living on the border of economic stability — not push them further over. But as Dimetra Boykins recognizes, that would involve decisionmakers like the Governor putting themselves in her shoes:

I want the people in leadership to consider: would they want their children to be treated like animals? Our 'leaders' need to start treating people the same way they would want to be treated. Would they live in those shelters? Then why should we have to live in those shelters?

As we examine the disastrous state-run warehouse shelters, we invite decisionmakers to step into the experience of the evacuees who lined, got into buses, reached an undisclosed destination, and were shocked to learn how wrong they were to trust the state at their time of greatest vulnerability.

Overview of the State-Run Sam's Club Warehouse Shelter, Shreveport, Louisiana¹¹

The first buses full of evacuees from New Orleans pulled up to Jewella Street in Shreveport, Louisiana on the evening of Saturday, August 30, 2008. This warehouse shelter was shocking even at first glance. When they first saw the shelter—an abandoned Sam's Club warehouse — the evacuees were surprised; some said they initially thought there had been a mistake. “I asked the bus driver if we were lost,” said Alan, a New Orleanean evacuated by bus to Shreveport. “But he didn't answer. That's when I realized it's not a mistake; this is where they're putting us.” Over 1000 people, predominantly working class African American residents of New Orleans — infants, children, seniors, individuals with disabilities, men and women, and individuals with illnesses, including diabetes — were all evacuated into this enormous warehouse. There were no divisions of the space, and they slept in cots that were laid shoulder to shoulder on the floor.

The shelter lacked the most basic infrastructure. Over 1000 residents shared one microwave and one refrigerator for general use. As a result, mothers could not heat or refrigerate food for infants, and residents initially had no access to running water within the facility. In the beginning, national guardsmen blocked even disabled residents and seniors from using the two functioning toilets within the facility. After a certain time, DSS responded to the lack of showers by opening the utility closet to seniors, and then to the general population, for two minute baths using the same utility bucket. Because there were no other showering facilities, many of the over 1000 residents shared the one bucket — granted 2 to 5 minutes to wash themselves. Other residents reported “bathing” in dirty portable toilets using bottled water. Mothers reported fighting physical disgust as they bathed their children out of bottles. “I had to wash my baby in a port-o-potty. After I finished I told her, I'm sorry. I told her she doesn't deserve to be treated like that. But I had to wash her in there,” said Dimetra Boykins. Initially residents counted approximately 20 portable toilets; close to 48 were in place by the time Workers' Center organizers arrived to assess shelter conditions.

DSS staff distributed meals through one food line, which meant that over a thousand people lined up each mealtime. This resulted in hours-long waits for food and many people went hungry. DSS provided no special food for individuals with medical dietary restrictions. Diabetics reported not eating because they did not want to risk eating the food provided for general consumption. A number of diabetics noticed drastic changes in their blood sugar that caused them insecurity and panic.

Evacuees received no news from DSS — no briefings or updates — about the impact of Hurricane Gustav on their home and communities, or about DSS's plans for their return to New Orleans. There wasn't even a television or radio in the facility until some residents set up one television set which the over 1000 residents then shared. “They won't even tell us how our homes are or what is going on in New Orleans,” said Derek William. Stranded far from home, residents understandably had questions: *Where did the hurricane hit? Was my neighborhood affected? What plans are being made to take us home? Will we get financial assistance when we get back?* Residents reported asking DSS staff, national guardsmen, and local police, but no one would respond. Being cut off from news compounded residents' sense of panic, and led to mounting tensions among residents and between residents, law enforcement, and DSS staff. Other than the print material and verbal updates supplied by STAND/ Workers' Center organizers, no written material was distributed to the evacuees and no news was given regarding the state of their home city and what New Orleans leadership was saying about the prospect of return.

Evacuees also faced tension from individuals in the Shreveport community. African American youth in the shelter reported that across the street local white residents asked them to stand in line at a gas station; when they did not, a local resident pulled a gun on them. None of the law enforcement at the shelter investigated the matter.

And even at night, the overhead lights were never shut off. At the Old Sam's shelter, the harsh steel-white fluorescent lights stayed on 24 hours a day, creating for the residents a bleary illusion of time at a standstill.

¹¹ For more detail, see the Old Sam's Club Shelter Assessment, included herein.

Overview of the State-Run Wal-Mart Warehouse Shelter, Bastrop, Louisiana¹²

When Tina Nuccio's bus pulled up to Bastrop, Louisiana late Saturday night, it was raining. She got off the bus with other residents— the first evacuees from New Orleans to arrive in Bastrop. They were rushed into an old Wal-Mart building utterly unfit for them. There were no cots, no bathrooms, and no showers—evacuated residents reported that DSS said it did not have any beds and bathroom facilities because they were not expecting evacuated residents yet. Tina recounted that amidst the rain, the darkness, and the unprepared staff, she slipped and hit her head on the tile floor. She waited over two hours before receiving assistance to go to the emergency room. When Charleston Preston, Sr. arrived a little later, he noticed a bad odor immediately upon entering the building and immediately worried for the health of his family.

Tina and Charleston were two of over a thousand residents taken to a state-run shelter in an abandoned Wal-Mart warehouse in Bastrop, Louisiana. Much like the Sam's Club shelter in Shreveport, the building was "unfit for human beings." The only bathrooms were portable toilets outside, installed soon after the first evacuees arrived. The National Guard blocked residents' use of the handful of functioning toilets in the facility. Brooke, the mother of a handicapped child, reported being allowed by a national guardsman to use those facilities for her child in an emergency, but she was told, "If you're not out in two minutes, I'll break the door down." There were no shower facilities for five days. Residents were given bottles of water and told to shower in the portable toilets. "For us to have to leave our house to go into port-potties to shower with shit, tissue, and crap all over — I will never evacuate like this again," said Charleston, expressing the sentiment of many residents.

Residents reported mildew on the walls and in the vents, and even possibly asbestos in the floor. The facilities and these conditions made the residents sick and overwhelmed the limited clinic capacity. "My husband and son threw up every day," reported resident Tina Nuccio. "The nurse they had wasn't enough to ensure everyone who was in need was seen." The increasing sickness of residents was also a public health disaster given that the facility was not cleaned on a daily basis. Charleston Preston's son was so sick by the end of the evacuation that he had to have his tonsils removed.

Despite their level of humiliation and physical sickness, residents evacuated to Bastrop did not list the facilities and physical condition of the shelter as their most serious concern. Instead, the evacuees housed in Bastrop objected most to the actions and attitudes of the local police officers and national guardsmen present on shelter detail.

Indeed, the number of police officers and national guards gathered outside the building resembled a law enforcement training facility more than a shelter for hurricane evacuees. And without exception, residents experienced these armed men as risks to their safety, rather than as a source of security. Parents in particular were terrified for the safety of their children and the trauma of this exposure. Dionne Morgan, a mother, reported that an officer dropped his gun near where children were playing. Another mother, Kiesha Shelby, reported lying awake at night listening to the officers lock and load their weapons— "I heard it all night long, every night," she said. "I would cover my baby's ears while she was asleep..."

For all the local police and national guardsmen deputized to the old Wal-Mart, the battery of law enforcement officials did not make anyone feel safer. When local residents drove by shouting racial epithets at the shelter or cruising the highway with signs that read, "Nigger go home," law enforcement did not attempt to protect or ensure the residents' safety. Law enforcement did not even set a crossing guard for children and elderly evacuees trying to step out of the building and cross the 4-lane highway just outside the shelter.

Instead of ensuring shelter residents felt protected and secure, law enforcement officials operated a prison-like operation at the old warehouse. Residents were only allowed to use one door to enter and another— on the other side of the facility— to exit. Everyone— from two year-old children to the elderly— was subjected to searches with wands and metal detectors every time they entered or exited the facility, even when they went to, and returned from, the bathrooms. One youth was reluctant to take his belt off while he passed through the metal detector, because he was afraid his pants would

¹² For more detail, see the Wal-Mart Shelter Assessment, included herein.

fall. Law enforcement officials forced him to take the belt off. He did, and his pants fell. Officers then arrested him for indecent exposure and beat and detained him. Charleston said that after this incident, many residents became so afraid of becoming the victims of violence at the hands of law enforcement that they sat for hours on their crowded cots, limiting even their basic movements around the shelter facility and parking lot.

Evacuated resident Lethia Brooks summed up the general sentiment during the assessment when she said, “We didn’t want to evacuate into a prison. We wanted to evacuate into a shelter.” The feeling of being imprisoned was sharpened greatly by the fact that community members, friends, and visitors — any outsiders — were barred from the shelter property. Residents reported that Red Cross staff and members of the media corps were denied entrance to the warehouse facility. Staff of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice were threatened with arrest and directed to leave the shelter property by local law enforcement when attempting to speak with residents. When asked why they could not talk with eager residents in the parking lot outside the shelter, law enforcement warned, “this is state property and the state does not want you here.”

Residents summed up their feelings of powerlessness through retelling the story of one woman who was so desperate to get out of the shelter that she started walking down the highway. Upon learning of her departure, law enforcement set off and found her miles down the road. After identifying her as a shelter resident, they detained her and returned her to the Wal-Mart shelter.

Recommendations: What Changes do the Affected Residents Want?

“It’s the state’s policy, that’s the problem. When only poor people have to stay in state-run shelters then the state doesn’t care about the conditions. In the next evacuation, it ought to be mandatory that state officials spend a couple of nights at one of these shelters with their families. See how they feel having to get bottled water to wash up in a portable toilet. See how they feel having no showers — no privacy — no real medical care. Let them bring their elderly and handicapped parents — their wife and newborn children. Then the state would make a real plan for these emergencies.”

Harriett Humes, New Orleans Resident evacuated to Shreveport

From the time they arrived, evacuated residents realized that they could not rely on the state for even the most basic necessities. Seeing that protecting their health and dignity would require a struggle, evacuated residents began to work collectively to both protect their families and to force the state to do its job. “We weren’t asking for silver and gold,” summed up one resident, “just to be treated as human beings.” Evacuees pooled resources to get one television so that residents could get the most basic news about their home communities. They shared available food, soap, towels and pillows to keep children and elderly family members as comfortable as possible. And meanwhile they pressured shelter staff, state officials, and local officials to raise standards at its shelters.

Circulating petitions and gathering hundreds of signatures, residents showed that the problems they faced were shared by other shelter residents and their requests to DSS were reasonable. By the end of the evacuation, the local mayors of both Shreveport and Bastrop had agreed. After meeting with the residents, both accepted the petitions and agreed to forward them to Secretary Williamson of the DSS as well as to Governor Jindal. Calling the Bastrop shelter, “inappropriate, inhumane, unsanitary, and everything else,” Mayor Clarence Hawkins of Bastrop admitted to residents that the state had been unprepared for their arrival and care.¹³ Agreeing to forward their petition he said, “If something’s broke, let’s fix it not cover it up.”¹⁴

The evacuated residents’ actions worked. After they exposed real shelter conditions on the evening news in Shreveport and Bastrop, long sought after showers finally arrived. After the first 900 signatures arrived on Secretary Williamson’s desk, she came to Shreveport to conduct DSS’s first in-person assessment of the Sam’s Club shelter. Within twelve hours of her visit, the Shreveport Sam’s Club residents were among the first on buses homeward bound for New Orleans.

Even as they return to rebuilding their lives, these residents maintain their call of “Never Again.” Specifically they ask that Gov. Jindal and Secretary Williamson take concrete measures to repair, at least in part, the damage caused to thousands of residents as a result of Louisiana’s shelter policy. Specifically, these residents demand that:

Louisiana Governor Jindal and DSS Sec. Williamson should **revoke the differential treatment sheltering policy**, and offer a formal apology for the suffering it caused vulnerable residents.

Jindal and Williamson should direct DSS to **work with directly affected communities and their representatives to develop a new sheltering policy**. Both decisionmakers should meet immediately with a taskforce of evacuees, residents, and their representatives to being the process of creating new policy.

The state’s new shelter plan must be based on principles of *inclusion, access, and equity* for poor and working class

¹³ Minutes of September 5, 2008 meeting with Mayor Clarence Hawkins of Bastrop on file with the Workers’ Center.

¹⁴ Ibid.

African Americans and for all communities in Louisiana.

The state must **include the directly affected communities** — those who have the hardest time evacuating — in creating the plan for shelters during disaster.

A state shelter plan must **give the hardest-hit communities equal access** to humanitarian relief during every phase of disaster — because they need it the most.

The state must ensure that the policy is **equitable**. The present differential treatment shelter policy plays out to disproportionately disadvantages poor and working class African Americans — whether by intention, or by impact. The state must instead adopt an **equitable disaster policy that proactively advantages the poor** by prioritizing them at the precise time that they are most vulnerable.

Shreveport Shelter Conditions Assessment

Type Of Facility	Former Sam's Club Warehouse
Location	8810 Jewella, Shreveport, Louisiana / Caddo Parish
Capacity	3,600 Residents
Number Of Evacuated Residents Housed There	1500 - 2000 People
Type Of Staff	Law Enforcement (50-100) 24-hour presence Medical (1-2) present 9am -5pm Crisis Intervention (none) Childcare (none) Elder Care (none) DSS General staff (unknown)

Inadequate Public Health and Sanitation

- The shelter had no regular access to running water inside the shelters.
- Residents were directed to bathe in a utility closet with a single bucket that was not sanitized between uses.
- There were no changing tables for babies.
- There was no hygienic space for daily medical needs.
- There were no separate eating and sleeping spaces.
- The inside floors or the warehouse were not sanitized daily.
- There were inadequate portable toilets for the number of residents (initially 20) and they were not cleaned often enough.

Individual Health Concerns

- Most sick residents reported leaving sicker than when they arrived.
- Many healthy residents also reported leaving with new infections and sicknesses.
- There was no food available that was appropriate for diabetics.
- There was no care available for expecting mothers or those that had recently given birth.
- There were no handicapped portable toilets for 4-5 days and when they arrived they were inadequately cleaned.
- There was no medical assistance on site 24 hours a day in the evenings and at night.
- The clinic staff during the day could only dispense over the counter drugs.
- The inability of most residents to sleep caused physical stress.
- Sick residents were intermingled with other residents.

Mental Health Concerns

- The inhumane physical conditions caused extreme stress for residents.
- The lack of information about conditions at home and return also caused extreme stress.
- The third anniversary of Katrina brought back many traumatic memories to many residents.
- Finally, the extreme presence of law enforcement also caused many residents extreme stress. There were no therapists, no



addition counselors, no pastoral counselors, and no other type of crisis counselors available to residents.

General Shelter Conditions

- There were no showers for 4-5 days.
- Residents had to go outside, often in stormy conditions, to use the portable toilets.
- Even the portable toilets were not separated for men, women, and children.
- There was no privacy for changing clothes, nursing, or other personal medical needs.
- Thousands of cots were pushed so close together that they were touching.
- The lights were kept on 24 hours a day.
- There was no refrigeration or ice for cold water or any other cold drink.
- Food and other necessities were dispensed through one line thousands of people long.
- There was no scheduled recreation for kids.



Assessments are based on onsite investigation and interviews with evacuated residents by NOWCRJ staff. Assessments are approximate pending production of further data by the Louisiana Department of Social Services in response to a pending public records act request.

Bastrop Shelter Conditions Assessment

Type Of Facility	Former Wal-Mart Store
Location	2030 East Madison Street, Bastrop, Louisiana / Morehouse Parish
Capacity	2,000 Residents
Number Of Evacuated Residents Housed There	800 left at the time of the assessment
Type Of Staff	Law Enforcement (100 plus) 24-hour presence Medical (3-4) present 11am -5pm Crisis Intervention (none) Childcare (none) Elder Care (none) DSS General staff (unknown)

Inadequate Public Health and Sanitation

- The shelter had no regular access to running water inside the shelters.
- There were no changing tables for babies.
- There was no hygienic space for daily medical needs.
- There were no separate eating and sleeping spaces.
- The inside floors or the warehouse were not swept or sanitized daily.
- There were inadequate portable toilets for the number of residents and they were not cleaned often enough.
- The building was in ill repair and there was no certification regarding protection from asbestos or other environmental harms.

Individual Health Concerns

- Most sick residents reported leaving sicker than when they arrived.
- Many healthy residents also reported leaving with new infections and sicknesses.
- Some residents reported an unwillingness to take regular medications which caused more frequent urination because using the portable toilets posed a greater health risk.
- There was no food available that was appropriate for diabetics.
- There was no care available for expecting mothers or those that had recently given birth.
- There were no handicapped portable toilets for 4-5 days and when they arrived they were inadequately cleaned.
- There was no medical assistance on site 24 hours a day in the evenings and at night.
- The clinic staff during the day could only dispense over the counter drugs.
- The inability of most residents to sleep caused physical stress.
- Sick residents were intermingled with other residents.

Mental Health Concerns

- The inhumane shelter conditions caused extreme stress for residents.
- The lack of information about conditions at home and return also caused extreme stress.
- The third anniversary of Katrina brought back many traumatic memories to many residents. ➤ Finally, the extreme presence of law



enforcement also caused many residents extreme stress.

There were no therapists, no addition counselors, no pastoral counselors, and no other type of crisis counselors available to residents.

General Shelter Conditions

- Law enforcement officers were hostile and abusive.
- Community workers, the red cross, and the media were each prohibited from entering the shelter.
- Residents are subjected to a metal detector search and/or a personal search every time they return from the portable toilet.
- There were no showers for 4-5 days.
- Residents had to go outside, often in stormy conditions, to use the portable toilets.
- Even the portable toilets were not separated for men, women, and children.
- There was no privacy for changing clothes, nursing, or other personal medical needs.
- Thousands of cots were pushed so close together that they were touching.
- There was no scheduled recreation for kids.
- One resident who tried to leave on foot was returned to the shelter by the National Guard after walking almost 10 miles.



Assessments are based on onsite investigation and interviews with evacuated residents by NOWCRJ staff. Assessments are approximate pending production of further data by the Louisiana Department of Social Services in response to a pending public records act request.

The following STAND members played key roles in the organizing work that produced this report:

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STAND is a grassroots group of elders, farmers, skilled workers, and fathers who have formerly experienced or are 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 saw the most viable solution was within us. 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.