

**Greg Davis, Chairman
IAAM Shelter Task Force
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In response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, many of America's arenas, stadiums and convention centers were asked to convert their operations to mega-shelters to accommodate thousands of evacuees who were in desperate need of basic living necessities and medical services. Facility Managers around the country responded to this call without hesitation, focusing with great passion on the needs of many senior citizens, children and families who were trying to survive a terrible disaster.

Public assembly facilities were converted to mass care facilities for extended periods. There was no precedence for such operations. This new territory of facility management required the resourcefulness and skill of the professional facility manager and staff, to respond adequately to the needs of evacuees. They demonstrated an ability to perform under extreme circumstances.

Before Hurricane Katrina, most shelters consisted of schools, churches and recreation centers. They were small, accommodating up to a thousand people on average. For the first time in our nation's history, in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, arenas, convention centers and stadiums were used to accommodate tens of thousands of evacuees over several weeks. These facilities provided sleeping arrangements, showers, clothing, medical services, social services, postal services, mental health counseling, classrooms, recreation centers, religious services, laundry services, pet and animal

control, security and three meals a day. Some facilities even required isolation rooms to house evacuees with contagious diseases.

The Cajundome, which was used as a mega-shelter in Lafayette, Louisiana, accommodated 18,500 evacuees over 58 days. It provided 409,000 meals to evacuees and first responders. Houston's Reliant Park sheltered 27,100 evacuees over 37 days. They processed another 65,000 evacuees located throughout Houston as a processing center for the state.

Shelters in Dallas, including the Dallas Convention Center and the Reunion Arena, provided shelter for 25,000, processed another 27,000 for American Red Cross benefits over 39 days and served 114,200 meals.

The first difficulty that confronted the facility manager was the fear that was generated in communities from the depiction of evacuees as looters, rapist and thugs. Television news created a false image of the evacuee. They were not looters, rapist and thugs. They were senior citizens, children, mothers and families desperately trying to survive a devastating disaster.

When evacuees arrived by the bus loads for the help that was available at public assembly facilities, they found professionals who were ready to deliver compassionate care in spite of the televised sensationalism at the Superdome and the Morial Convention Center.

Hurricane Katrina exposed several weaknesses in our nation's ability to respond to major disasters involving the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in a major metropolitan area enduring almost total devastation. One of these weaknesses involved the sheltering of evacuees before, during and after Hurricane Katrina. For the first time in our nation's history, the term mega-shelter was used to describe public assembly facilities like Reliant Park, the Cajundome and the Dallas Convention Center. The Hurricane Katrina disaster exposed a vital need for nationally recognized mega-shelter standards.

Managers who operate public assembly facilities relied on their association, the International Association of Assembly Managers (IAAM) to respond to the need for best practice guidelines for mega-shelter operations. Soon after the storms of 2005, the IAAM reached out to facility managers affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. IAAM quickly discovered the need for an industry task force to establish nationally recognized guidelines for public assembly facilities that are converted to mega-shelters. The IAAM also reached out to its industry partners, the Department of Homeland Security and the American Red Cross.

In the summer of 2006, it released comprehensive best practice guidelines for mega-shelter operations. This booklet was shipped to arenas, convention centers and stadiums on the Gulf Coast and the Atlantic Seaboard. If called into service, facility managers will

now have critical sheltering guidelines that will help them face the extreme challenges of sheltering thousands of evacuees from a major disaster.

In October of this year, we saw thousands of people in San Diego fleeing their homes to the safety of Qualcomm Stadium. This facility converted to mega-shelter operations quickly and effectively. The lessons learned from the 2005 storms are helping responders do better in servicing disaster victims.

To convert to mega shelter operations, public assembly facilities must stop their normal business operations and in many cases cancel events. Most do not have a tax base to sustain operations and are unable to generate revenues to make payroll and to pay the expenses of operating the shelter.

In secondary and tertiary markets, this is especially problematic due to the inability of local government to fund a mega-shelter operation. Cleaning and custodial costs, for example, can cost several thousand dollars per day when hospital sanitation standards are required to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. In many cases, cash reserves are not sufficient to sustain the shelter operation over the long term.

Through its partnerships with the Department of Homeland Security and the American Red Cross, the IAAM hopes we can agree on nationally recognized reimbursement guidelines that will require FEMA to pay usage fees and to reimburse the hard cost of shelter operations and recovery.

Most public assembly facilities self-generate their operating revenues. Most do not have a tax base to sustain their operations once normal operations are stopped and events are canceled. Federal Disaster Assistance Guidelines must include the payment of usage fees, sheltering costs and recovery costs.

Public assembly facilities are now integral to disaster response. These valuable public assets are now available for the public good as they have never been before. The IAAM and the public assembly industry it serves stand ready to assist citizens across America when disasters require them to take shelter in an arena, stadium or convention center.