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AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

The Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Cultural Center sponsored a food drive Sunday with free dance performances, music and food. The event was originally planned as an 11th birthday celebration for the nonprofit center but was converted to a food drive for hurricane evacuees. Jessica Montoya, a teacher and dancer at the center, demonstrates a style of dance called Bomba.

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HURRICANE IKE

Disaster officials address criticisms, policies in shelters

Evacuees are grateful for what they have but still discouraged by limited bedding and food.

By [Andrea Ball](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Monday, September 15, 2008

Hurricane Ike evacuee Lisa Crowell is grateful.

As the Category 2 storm tore across the coast, Austin's shelter volunteers gave her food, compassion and a roof over her head.

But she can't help comparing the Austin shelter with the one she stayed in during Hurricane Rita.

"We were in Brownwood," said Crowell, a 47-year-old Matagorda resident who stayed at Canyon Vista Middle School over the weekend. "They had everything you could ever want: towels, food 24 hours a day, bedding, movies for the kids. It was great."

For nearly a week, some Ike evacuees, many of whom were sheltered in other cities across the state during previous storms, have criticized accommodations at Austin's facilities.

They've slammed the city for the lack of cots, bedding and other supplies; about having to drive to multiple shelters to find one that had room for them; and about the quality and quantity of food.

But disaster response officials say that they did a good job housing 6,300 evacuees in 22 local shelters and that most people are satisfied with their accommodations.

"The vast number of people are grateful for what they have," said Sara Hartley of the City of Austin's Office of Emergency Management.

Austin's disaster response plan is coordinated by the city, the American Red Cross of Central Texas and area school districts.

They designate and organize shelters; supply food, supplies and medical care; and staff shelters with volunteers and law enforcement officers.

Those agencies make the major decisions that will affect the evacuees staying in the area. A cadre of other governments, school districts and volunteer organizations help administer those policies.

As of Sunday evening, fewer than 4,000 evacuees remained in more than a dozen shelters in Travis, Williamson and Hays counties. Officials had begun to move evacuees who were assigned to schools into the Austin Convention Center.

Some evacuees could remain in Austin for several weeks.

Last week, the convention center had been reserved for up to 1,000 medically fragile evacuees and those with special needs.

At the peak, 87 such evacuees were at the center, American Red Cross spokeswoman Elaine Acker said.

The schools were the best option for emergency housing, officials said. But now school shelters are being consolidated as much as possible, said Jo Moss, who is managing the school system's response to the disaster.

During the last evacuation, parents complained that evacuees had smoked in the schools and mingled with students.

This time, evacuees have not been permitted to smoke in the buildings, Moss said. Shelter residents wear identifying wristbands, and schools are being staffed with law enforcement officials who lock doors that lead into hallways or classrooms, said school district spokesman Andy Welch.

One of the biggest complaints among evacuees was the lack of cots or bedding. That issue came up earlier this month when about 300 evacuees arrived after fleeing Hurricane Gustav.

But Red Cross officials defended the decision not to provide bedding then, and they're defending it now.

The city had been prepared to house up to 25,000 people in more than 75 shelters. The Red Cross decided to offer cots only to the elderly or people with special needs. Providing cots for everyone would have been a logistical nightmare, Acker said.

"This is designed to be short-term shelter," she said. "We don't have 25,000 cots, and we do not have a place to store them if we did have them."

Now that thousands of evacuees may remain in Austin for several weeks, the agency will start providing cots to long-term evacuees, she said. Everyone in the convention center already has one.

Donations of bedding, clothing or household items for evacuees are not being accepted. Though community leaders appreciate the generous gestures, the massive amount of such items creates more problems that it solves, Hartley said.

After hurricanes Katrina and Rita, volunteers sifted through tons of items.

Many donated items — such as stained mattresses, old shoes and prom dresses — were completely unusable, she said.

"We became a dumping ground," she said.

Instead, the Red Cross has been soliciting financial donations.

Residents are also encouraged to give food and money to the Capital Area Food Bank.

More than 25,000 pounds of food and \$25,000 have been given to the food bank, said spokeswoman Kerri Qunell.

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