

Diversify and Strengthen the Region's Emergency Shelter Network

Initiative Summary Statement:

Improve sheltering facilities and operations for community members and first response partners by expanding capacity and hardening existing shelter facilities.

Initiative Description:

Objective: During and after Hurricane Ian, shelters provided respite for many families and individuals threatened by the storm, made homeless by the impacts, or needing emergency assistance. As the County experiences a variety of changes— from population shifts to increasingly severe storms— the network of shelters across the region should be evaluated and then strengthened to better support changing recovery needs in all neighborhoods and be resilient to disaster conditions. Additionally, the region should pursue increases in the number, type (every day building function) and position of shelters in the Lee County area. Even as the region pursues diversity, a continuing cornerstone of the shelter strategy will continue to be the use of area schools as shelters: Florida Statute 1013.372 requires that all new educational facilities must be able to serve as public shelters for emergency management purposes unless the facility is exempted by the applicable board with the concurrence of County Emergency Management/Public Safety.

Need: While utilizing schools as shelters maximizes the availability of state and other grant funding to go towards modernizing and expanding education facilities to support the County's growing population, there is also the need to diversify sheltering options to increase accessibility and prevent situations in which school needs to resume but sheltering residents are still present. As such, it is vital to identify other publicly owned infrastructure or planned infrastructure that can be retrofitted or hardened to comply with shelter standards. Assisted living facilities should also harden their buildings to required Florida Building Code standards to protect residents. Efforts to support residents with access and functional needs as well as families with members with developmental disabilities like Autism, should be considered a priority in this planning process.

Regional Approach: It is recommended that the region go through a phase of strategic improvements focused on strengthening operations, hardening selected facilities (backup power and generators), identifying locations for new facilities, augmenting operations to include additional training opportunities and coordination for staff, improving communications and messaging to the public, and expanding the services available. Identifying locations for new facilities can also include vacant retail spaces that could be

converted into a shelter. This should also include setting new standards for access to healthcare for those at shelters by potentially partnering with healthcare and mental health providers and incorporating wraparound services for those who could become homeless following a catastrophic event.

Impact: Lee County has taken steps towards diversifying the sheltering strategy with its long-standing relationship with Hertz Arena, and this strategy should be further developed to identify alternate sheltering options for the public. This will also take the pressure off schools to serve as the only options for sheltering so students can return to school as soon as practicable. Also, by providing additional resources while in shelters, residents will be better equipped to resume normal, everyday life. Emphasis can also be made on the demobilization priorities for shelters, to release school-based shelters as soon as possible to allow for the restoration of the facility and resumption of school.

Key Considerations:

- Analyze the sheltering data and timelines from Hurricane Ian to identify gaps and bottlenecks.
- Develop an assessment tool for facilities and operations to identify existing shelter facilities to determine hardening and locations for new shelter facilities along with services to be provided.
- Evaluate prospects for using several smaller shelters instead of one larger shelter.
- Explore retrofitting generators for all existing shelters as a key policy going forward and confirming resilient power capable of operating the HVAC system for up to 96 hours.
- Develop a demobilization plan for emergency shelters, with an emphasis on releasing schools so they can return to normal operations following disasters in a timelier manner and reestablish normalcy.
- Improve healthcare services provided at shelters by establishing partnerships with a variety of partners that includes those with knowledge of the access and functional needs community as well as other vulnerable populations in the County.
- Conduct exercises that activate shelter staff and stress test shelter operations.
- Increase the capacity of Special Needs Shelters.
- Consider establishing agreements with neighboring counties to expand the inland sheltering network and increase capacity.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Infrastructure, Health & Social Services

Stakeholders:

- Florida Division of Emergency Management and other state partners.
- County departmental experts on public safety and emergency management.
- Municipal departmental experts on public safety and emergency management.
- School District
- Access and Functional Needs Advocates
- Florida Department of Health

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Department of Homeland Security
- United States Department of Agriculture
- Philanthropic Groups

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