

***From the Tampa Tribune* – An Editorial**
Finding Foul-Weather Friends

Should a major hurricane approach Tampa Bay's urban coast, local shelters would be hard pressed to house everyone who might show up. Public shelters are essential, but they shouldn't be the first option for everyone who needs to evacuate.

A better plan is to make your own arrangements with relatives or friends who live in safer areas, perhaps only a few miles away. The trouble is, many folks living in flood zones or wind-vulnerable mobile homes don't know anyone well enough to show up with their bags and pets the day disaster looms. So when a storm approaches, many will be tempted to ride it out at home.

Thousands of families would be willing to be hosts if only they could be assured their guests would be law-abiding and compatible. That's where a new organization called Shelter Is Golden is trying to help out.

It is seeking to match those needing shelter with those willing to provide it. Everyone who signs up will be screened by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and matches will be arranged with care, says program director Ward Cox. The effort is part of the not-for-profit group For the Family.

The service will be especially valuable to the elderly and those with special needs. For example, someone with a cat could be paired with a cat lover, Cox says. Hosts and guests are encouraged to meet ahead of time to make sure they get along. Guests are told what supplies to bring and required to sign a legal document agreeing to leave as soon as the disaster officially ends.

The program operates at no cost to participants, but Cox is hoping for state and federal support to cover the minimal costs of keeping records and answering the telephone. It would seem a good investment because the program has the potential to reduce the emergency strain on government shelters and lower the traffic on highways. Cox is concentrating on residents of Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Manatee. To sign up, telephone (813) 653-5239.