

From the Tampa Tribune:
Plan pairs hurricane evacuees with hosts
Michelle Bearden, Staff Writer

A hurricane is bearing down on the Tampa Bay area, and you are in an evacuation zone. Where do you go?

Nowhere?

Nearly half the people living in areas most likely to be hit by storm surge did not evacuate when hurricanes threatened last year, according to a Florida State University survey.

“A lot of people did not evacuate for a variety of reasons,” said Ward Cox, administrator of Tampa-based For The Family, a private nonprofit group that links people and organizations to improve community life. “Maybe it was because they didn’t want to leave pets behind. Or they didn’t like the idea of a public shelter.”

Cox’s group is launching a program he hopes will eliminate those excuses. Called Shelter Is Golden, the service links volunteer hosts with potential guests from areas likely to be evacuated. Both parties fill out questionnaires that provide demographic and lifestyle information, and once matched, meet each other.

It does not take much to be a host, Cox said, “Just a strong spirit and a strong house.”

The program is free. Any costs will be underwritten by Cox’s group, which is supported by private donations.

“When an emergency happens, there’s a comfort level,” he said. “There’s a feeling of confidence when you know you have somewhere to go and you know exactly what to bring with you.”

Getting Prepared Now

With hurricane season starting in less than two months, Cox is scrambling to promote the program. He is working with religious and Neighborhood Watch groups, teachers associations, major employers and emergency services personnel. The idea is to pair people with common interests and avoid last-minute surprises.

Among the questions asked of potential hosts: Are housebroken pets welcomed? Do You have a generator? Is there a history of flooding in your neighborhood? How many days are you willing to accommodate?

As for guests, they need to disclose personal information that is kept totally confidential. If you are a smoker or drinker, would you refrain from these practices if requested by your host? If you have children, what are their ages? Does anyone in your household have special medical or dietary needs?

The Rev. Rick Malivuk, pastor at All Saints Lutheran Church in Lutz, is the program’s first host. As a Christian, “I feel this is part of our mandate: to welcome a stranger into our midst,” he said, “and to lend a hand to those in our community.”

Malivuk, a volunteer with the Tampa Bay Regional Critical Incident Team – a group that helps during police and fire emergencies – knows the importance of emergency preparedness. Yet most people don’t think about it until it is too late.

Shelter Is Golden allows people to put a plan in place before a disaster.

“Let’s face it. It’s necessary to evacuate if you’re in an evacuation zone,” Malivuk said. “Sleeping on a gym floor or spending a few days with neighbors – which would you rather do?”

There may be no room on the gym floor anyway. According to Cox, Hillsborough County has space for less than half of the people who would need them.

Widening the Program’s Scope

Marilyn Durst, president of the Tampa Neighborhood Watch Association, called the program “a wonderful concept.” Yet it will require people to change some attitudes, she acknowledged.

“First you have to get over the squeamishness of opening your home to strangers or going into a stranger’s home.” [**Note: all Hosts and Guests meet one another before the emergency to help eliminate this concern**] Durst said, “This isn’t the 1950s anymore. We’re more insulated. This requires people to get past some barriers.”

She also said the program needs to be more expansive to be effective. In other words, New Tampa residents need to be willing to open their houses to the more vulnerable south Tampa homeowners.

Cox is confident that Shelter Is Golden will catch on, particularly while memories of 2004 are still fresh.

“I know there are a lot of people out there who have a good spirit and are compelled to help their brothers through difficult situations,” he said. “This is an opportunity to follow the golden rule we talk so much about.”