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Families scramble as housing aid ends

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About 3,000 Louisiana families left homeless after two hurricanes in 2005 are again looking for places to live as their federal housing assistance came to an end Friday.

Five families in East Baton Rouge Parish and 108 families in six surrounding parishes are still living in trailers or mobile homes provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, according to FEMA's records.

Susan Mangipano said her Lacombe home, which suffered about \$45,000 worth of damage, is still not in a livable condition. She is among the affected families living in nearly 240 FEMA housing units in St. Tammany Parish.

The Louisiana Family Recovery Corps, a Baton Rouge-based nonprofit created after hurricanes Katrina and Rita to assist families, is helping Mangipano rebuild her home. But there is still a few months' worth of work to be done, she said.

Mangipano said she has requested an extension to stay in her FEMA unit, but doesn't know if she will receive it.

"I don't know what I'll do," she said. "Pitch a tent?"

Andrew Thomas, a FEMA spokesman, said the agency is working with people on a case-by-case basis, along with the Louisiana Recovery Authority and nonprofits, to ensure families are on their way to finding permanent housing.

"If somebody is days or even a week or two from moving back into their home, certainly we will allow for that," Thomas said. "Plus, our focus is going to be on the ones that are already vacant."

Thomas said trailers that have been vacated have to be inspected and get power and sewer services cut off. It can take from a few days to up to two weeks, depending on how many units are being vacated at a given time, he said.

Audrey Dubose, of Slidell, said a FEMA representative came to her trailer Thursday and said they were going to lock it up. She said she was not there at the time, but her husband was told they needed to remove their belongings by Friday.

No one came Friday, Dubose said. When she called FEMA, she was told a letter would be sent to her next week with the time of her final inspection and closure, she said.

Dubose said she tried to tell FEMA the Family Recovery Corps is working on her home too.

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"FEMA just wanted their trailer," she said.

Louisiana Recovery Authority spokeswoman Christina Stephens said her agency has attempted to contact 76 hotel residents also receiving federal assistance. Staff are also meeting with FEMA often and participating in their trailer visits, she said.

The LRA is working with nonprofits to either keep families afloat until more permanent housing is found or get them housing vouchers they could be eligible for, she said.

"We're not interested in keeping people in trailers as we head into hurricane season," she said. "At the same time, we don't want people to become homeless."

The LRA is also trying to ensure another 14,600 families in the federal Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which ends Aug. 31, are adequately prepared to transition out, Stephens said.

Lisa Guyllette, a caseworker with the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, said many families who want to get back in their homes lack the resources to pay for rebuilding.

Mangipano and Dubose both said they had contractors who ran off with their money without finishing work on their homes. Both also said they had to take their insurance companies to court to get the money they were entitled to for damages.

Especially in the rural areas, resources are spread out and there is a no public transportation for residents to find homes or jobs, Guyllette said.

"Some of them have been able to locate affordable rental property," Guyllette said. "Many of them are having considerable difficulty doing that."