

Town welcomes evacuees

- Two hundred evacuees call a former college campus home for now.

Nathan Cain

NORMAN PARK — In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the tiny Colquitt County town of Norman Park, population 868, has grown by almost one-third.

The new residents, formerly of Biloxi, Miss., were bused in during the wee hours of the morning a week and a half after Katrina struck. They had only the clothes on their backs, and those had to be burned to prevent a disease outbreak once they arrived in Georgia.

When they reached the Norman Park Convention Center, volunteers greeted the evacuees with a fried chicken dinner.

Almost overnight, employees of the conference center, the Red Cross and volunteers from throughout Southwest Georgia came together and helped create a small town, complete with a post office, dining hall, clinic, church services, bus system, newsletter and entertainment.

"We are a city in ourself right now," said David Cook, an associational missionary with the Georgia Baptist Convention. Cook has been serving as volunteer coordinator at the shelter.

Cook said the shelter has had 30-50 volunteers a day since it opened.

Friday, Gov. Sonny Perdue visited the shelter, dubbed "Camp Hope" by volunteers, and addressed both evacuees and volunteers. He told the crowd, who assembled in the conference center's auditorium, that he was proud of how Georgians had rallied to help their neighbors.

"This is the real soul of the South revealed, neighbor helping neighbor," Perdue said.

ADJUSTING TO NEW NEIGHBORS

Bill Townes, the conference center director, said the center, which used to be a college, is equipped to handle large numbers of people, and the real challenge has been helping people who have lost everything rebuild their lives.

"It's not an unfathomable number, but it is an unfathomable need," Townes said.

Still, in the face of such need, Townes said, the response has been tremendous. People have donated so much in the way of food, clothing, water and hygiene products that some of them are being shipped to areas where other evacuees lack necessities.

"We've been so inundated with gifts that we had to distribute them to other places," Townes said.

Townes said he had no idea how much housing people was costing. He had been instructed to "take care of people and share the love of Jesus."

Norman Park's new residents were being housed in two shelters in Biloxi and were transported to Norman Park by members of the group Shelter Closure, Relocation, Assessment and Management, or SCRAM, an organization formed by Alabama residents in the wake of Katrina.

"We're just a group of people that got together and said, 'You know, we need to help,'" said Patrick Velasco, the man who formed SCRAM. Velasco, a resident of Fairhope, Ala., said he saw media accounts of how people were suffering and knew he had to do something.

Velasco said he called his parish priest at St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Fairhope and that got the ball rolling. While St. Lawrence paid for the initial expenses, Velasco said, SCRAM is a nondenominational organization.

Velasco said the group was working to gain official nonprofit status. It is involved in improving living conditions at existing shelters and assessing damage to homes.

SCRAM's initial project, however, was moving residents from Biloxi Middle School, a shelter where a gastrointestinal illness had broken out and where people had nowhere to sleep, Velasco said.

"It was not a happy scene," Velasco said of conditions in the school.

Two hundred eighteen people were taken from Biloxi Middle School bound for Norman Park, but only about 200 made it, Velasco said. The rest needed medical attention and were dropped off at Providence Hospital in Mobile, Ala.

"Our whole goal was to get them to a place where they could be medically evaluated again and be taken care of," Velasco said.

Another group of evacuees from the shelter at Biloxi High School, consisting largely of family members of the first group of evacuees, were brought to Norman Park soon after the first group.

The Rev. Matt Stacey, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Pavo, said he worked to coordinate bringing the evacuees to Norman Park. Stacey said he had heard there were evacuees who needed a place to stay in Alabama, but when he started contacting people, he found out his information was not correct.

Stacey said he ended up in touch with Sherry-Lea Bloodworth, who Velasco said was a founding member of SCRAM, and that together they arranged to bring eight busloads of people from Biloxi to Norman Park.

Velasco said his group will also be involved with returning evacuees from Norman Park back to Mississippi if they want to go.

The General Assembly has two houses elected from districts. One state senator and two state representatives have districts that include all or part of Lee County.

Helen Sewell, executive director of the Colquitt County Red Cross, said her organization was working on moving people into transitional housing, so they could get back on their feet. The target date for moving people out of the Norman Park shelter is Thursday, she said.

"Our goal is to help these people restart their lives," she said.

Some shelter residents, however, said they were in no hurry to return to Mississippi.

"ALL THAT'S GONE"

Emirson Slay Jr. said he, his wife and two daughters, ages 7 and 11, were caught in their home as it was flooded. Slay said he put his 7-year-old on his shoulders as he and his family waded through chest-deep waters.

Slay is in Georgia alone. He said he thought his wife and children ended up at a family member's house in Mobile, and had gone from there to Virginia, but he had not had contact with them since they were separated.

Slay, who said he worked as a custodian for Goodwill, said he and his family were renters, but lost two cars and all of their other personal belongings.

"All that's gone," he said.

Slay said he did not have a job to go back to, so he planned on staying in Southwest Georgia and trying to find work.

"They're more hospitable here than any place I've ever been, and I'm 50 years old," he said.

Kenneth Weems came to Norman Park with his wife, Yvonne, and their two daughters, ages 2 and 6.

Weems said he and his family had to flee to the roof of their home to escape the flood waters, which knocked their home off its foundation and moved it across the street.

Weems said they were stranded for hours before being rescued by firefighters and taken to a shelter.

There is nothing for his family to go back to in Mississippi, Weems said.

"We ain't going back to Biloxi," he said.

Albert Harris, a New Orleans native, said he had a job as a poker dealer at the Copa Casino in Biloxi, but the casino is no longer standing.

Harris said he decided to ride out Katrina because he did not think it would be as destructive as it was.

"I had no idea it was going to be that bad," he said.

Harris said that not only was his workplace demolished, but also the building where he lived was moved off its foundation and would have to be torn down.

Harris said he was going to stay in Georgia for a while and look for work because he had neither a home nor a job.

MAKING GEORGIA HOME?

The volunteers at Norman Park had helped make a difficult experience bearable.

"They've been wonderful," Harris said. "I appreciate everything they've done for me."

Demisha Croft, a field services manager for the Georgia Department of Labor, said Tuesday that she did not have any hard numbers, but estimated that about 50 or 60 people looking for work had come into the makeshift office the department was running.

Croft said a lot of people seemed to have other priorities, such as looking for loved ones and applying for federal aid, but from what she was hearing, a lot of people want to stay in Georgia.

"It seems like a lot of them are hoping to be able to stay in the area," she said.