

Forced south: Sandy family moves to Florida for lack of aid

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Renee Sotelo made her way into the small kitchen toward the refrigerator, where she plucked a photo of her smiling, barrel-chested, husband wrapping his thick arms around their then 2-year-old daughter. She gazed proudly at the reminder of happier times.

Megan, now 9, and her 6-year-old sister Angela could be heard outside playing with their new friends as Brian Sotelo sat at the dining table and lit another cigarette, the smoke already hanging heavy in the cramped mobile home in a Jacksonville, Fla., trailer park otherwise known as Portside at the Beaches.

He's been thinking about quitting, but now doesn't seem like the right time. His family struggles to regain a bit of normalcy more than four months removed from superstorm Sandy and some 930 miles from the home they'd been renting on Kearney Avenue in Seaside Heights before being evacuated.

Finally, as if displaying the road map that led them to his place, Brian Sotelo stood and turned, raising his shirt to reveal the long vertical scar along his spine where surgeons installed steel rods and fused discs following a construction accident six years ago, leaving the family to live off the \$2,000 he receives each month from a disability settlement.

Then his wife fills in the blanks, her words tinged with disillusionment while detailing a nightmarish odyssey from the shelter system, including the deplorable conditions in Tent City at Monmouth Park to two months in a motel in Wildwood, before being effectively displaced by a highly competitive, increasingly expensive rental market. All while getting precious little in the form of assistance from the government or charities.

"Why do I want to go back to place I've called home my whole life that has basically turned their back on me and my family?" Renee Sotelo wondered, embittered as she hears the daily reports about the pace of rebuilding along the Jersey Shore from the place they're renting for \$750 a month. "When we were in the shelters, my whole family, we volunteered from the moment we got there ... so to be ignored, and worse yet forgotten about, is just very disheartening. Very upsetting."

Studying the two Sotelo girls, who each morning take the school bus to Jacksonville's Chet's Creek Elementary School, their third school this grade year, you couldn't help but feel they've deserved better since Sandy made landfall. They are still haunted by their experiences.

Both Megan and Angela grow sullen when reminded of the frigid conditions in Tent City, and they climb into their parents' bed every time a storm approaches. Megan speaks of their harrowing mid-January retreat to northern Florida in a small truck on a shoestring budget, and how the mobile home is a welcome relief from the cramped quarters of their single motel room.

"I grew up with nothing," Renee Sotelo said. "I look at it like I got a heads-up about what the real world is like when most people didn't.

"I'm not asking for much. It's just very disheartening the way my family and a lot of others have been treated. They say they're getting millions of dollars in donations, but most of the people aren't seeing any of it. We didn't want to leave New Jersey. We had to."

Renters suffering

Now, like so many others, they find themselves still battling the storm, long after the winds have died down, the water has receded and the national spotlight has dimmed.

Dreams came in many different forms prior to the Oct. 29 storm. And while some may have been grander than others, they all mattered.

An analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency data shows that four out of 10 state residents impacted were renters, with 41 percent of them earning less than \$15,000 annually, according to New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Policy and the Enterprise for Community Partners. Sixty-seven percent earned less than \$30,000. The largest number of requests for FEMA assistance came from Ocean County (52,878), with 77 percent of renters in Seaside Heights earning less than \$30,000 per year.

Currently, no numbers are available relating to displaced renters relocating outside the state.

When Gov. Chris Christie unveiled the state's action plan on Tuesday, outlining how the first \$1.8 billion in federal aid would be distributed, about one in every 20 renters would be helped according to Kevin Walsh, associate director of the Fair Share Housing Center.

"There are a fair number of upper-income people, but they are generally the people who have more resources to recover than lower-income renters do," said Walsh, "which is why it's so important that their needs take priority."

According to the action plan, more than \$279 million will be allocated to rental and special needs housing, amounting to some 5,300 units. It also states that 22 percent of all damage occurred to the rental stock.

"What we anticipate over the next few years is an affordable-housing boom here in the state of New Jersey as a result of this infusion of cash and the rental and housing programs we intend to implement," said state Department of Consumer Affairs Commissioner Richard E. Constable.

Constable indicated that he listened to concerns and entertained suggestions from Walsh and other affordable housing advocates in the weeks before the plan was unveiled.

"This plan is not a panacea and will not make every advocacy group happy," he added. "All I can tell you is that we are doing everything in our power to ensure that, as a state, we do not leave any population behind that had damage from Sandy — whether homeowners or renters. This is the first allocation and we will dedicate additional monies from future allocations to help improve the number of affordable housing units in the state, especially those communities disproportionately impacted by Sandy."

There's more than enough finger pointing to go around. But the reality is that many of the most vulnerable victims find themselves in precarious situations as they try to navigate through a tangle of red tape in an effort to secure both government assistance and charitable aid.

Behind the numbers

The statistics and dollar figures are just soulless notations on some computer screen. It's when you attach actual faces to the raw numbers that you come to understand just how difficult life has become for some families.

There was a single car parked on Barnegat Avenue in Seaside Heights one afternoon last week, in a section of town just over the bridge where most of the rentals are year-round.

Inside the home beside that lone sport-utility vehicle, Jamie O'Brien was nestled into a corner of the couch feeding a bottle to 4-month-old Sean Jr., born three months prematurely the day before Sandy struck.

The family of four sought refuge in Sean O'Brien's mother's one-bedroom apartment in Old Bridge after the storm surge ruined everything on the first floor.

Jamie spent 21/2 months traveling to Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch every day until Sean Jr. was released. All the while Sean was driving their 7-year-old daughter, Brianna, to first grade, which had to be relocated to Central Regional High School, because FEMA said if they registered her in Old Bridge they would no longer be considered displaced.

While his daughter was in school, Sean would head to Barnegat Avenue and help their landlord rip the place apart

“The way I feel is that FEMA talked all this stuff when this happened, saying they were going to take care of the residents that were displaced,” said Jamie O’Brien. “And you know what? I’m sorry to say they haven’t done a damn thing for my family. You didn’t give me enough on my personal property; you didn’t give me enough to survive.”

What they got was \$2,800 that they ended up having to use for gasoline back and forth to the Jersey Shore for four months and living expenses, and \$2,400 for their possessions, which went toward their new furniture. They’ve gotten nothing for Sean’s tools, as the unemployed mechanic who used to work on amusement rides along the waterfront, including the roller coaster that sits in the ocean nearby, is now finally able to begin looking for a job.

You do the math.

Hometown Heroes, the Toms River-based charity that’s done a great job locally, provided some money to help pay the rent, and there’s an income tax refund. But something’s got to break for them soon.

“We’re the only people on our block right now. There are so many people still displaced from their homes,” Jamie O’Brien said. “I’m a certified nurse’s aide and had been working in Manchester, but I couldn’t work while we were displaced, and now it’s hard to work with a preemie baby at home.”

They booted John Van Dyk from the shelter inside Monmouth Park the day before Thanksgiving after FEMA turned down his request for aid. So he ate his holiday dinner at a local church, and ever since has been crashing in a vacant office above a friend’s flower shop in Hazlet.

“In January, I got a call from FEMA, and they said they wanted to meet me where I used to live in Sea Bright,” he said. “So the FEMA guy comes, and I told him I had already been turned down because my brother was the leaseholder. He said the original guy didn’t do my application right and that I was entitled to something and he would be getting back to me. It’s two months later and I still haven’t heard from them.”

Now he’s trying to save money to rent a room somewhere, delivering flowers two days a week and picking up occasional work in his field of radio communications. But he’s resigned to idea he might be living in his van.

“As I told the FEMA guy at the time, all this FEMA money is supposed to be for people who were displaced,” said the 52-year-old. “I wasn’t displaced before the storm. The governor’s wife’s charity is sitting on \$32 million. You could rebuild Union Beach with that.

“Yet here I am, still in limbo, not sure where life is going, pretty much hustling trying to make buck here and there.”

I don’t claim to understand how things like suffering and despair are distributed, and I’m skeptical of those who claim they do. Nor do I have all the answers when it comes to getting the necessary assistance to the people who need it most. But when I look at families like the Sotelos and so many others I’ve encountered since superstorm Sandy, it clear there’s a gap to be bridged.

As for the hardest part of their ordeal, Renee Sotelo doesn’t have to think twice.

“Watching the kids,” she said. “Watching what they’ve gone through. Watching what they’ve had to lose. Seeing true fear for the first time. I’ve never seen my kids afraid like that. I don’t ever want to see it again.”

And maybe that’s not such an unreasonable expectation.