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Relying on Hotel Rooms for Thousands Uprooted by Hurricane Sandy

By MIREYA NAVARRO

Five months after [Hurricane Sandy](#), more than 2,000 people who were displaced by the storm remain in hotels in New York City, leading some officials to acknowledge that the city had not been prepared for the challenges in finding them housing.

City officials said those still in hotels were mostly poor, with no home to return to or not enough income to qualify for available apartments. They have also had difficulty obtaining assistance from existing disaster programs, social service groups said.

There are more than 900 households scattered among more than 45 hotels around the city in federal and city hotel programs, officials said. The [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) is expected to spend tens of millions of dollars on the hotel rooms, at an average cost of \$252 a night.

About 7,000 residents went to evacuation shelters in the weeks after the storm on Oct. 29.

The city's commissioner of homeless services, Seth Diamond, said in an interview this week that pulling together resources for the poorest of those displaced had taken time. But Mr. Diamond emphasized that hundreds of families were in the pipeline for public-housing apartments that have opened up in recent weeks. Another 150 families are expected to receive vouchers that subsidize 70 percent of their rents, he said, but they are required to go through evaluations, including background checks.

Until the needs of the evacuees were assessed, he said, "The hotels provided flexibility and availability that you can't get anywhere else."

City officials said the hotel stays should end by April 30 but they would not offer guarantees that everyone would move into apartments.

Some evacuees said they had been told by case workers that they could end up if no housing was available by the end of the month.

"Shelter is one of many possibilities," said Barbara Brancaccio, a spokeswoman Department of Homeless Services. But, she said, the ultimate goal was to get e



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permanent housing.

While FEMA pays for the hotels, long-term rental assistance, which the city is requesting, depends on recovery funds that are subject to Congressional approval and interagency agreements.

Some housing experts and elected officials said the city's reliance on hotels underscored how federal and local disaster planning had to be revised to include more emergency rental assistance.

"Why are we spending money on hotels instead of helping families pay the rent?" asked Rosanne Haggerty, president of [Community Solutions](#), a nonprofit organization in New York that works to end homelessness. She added, "For a fraction of the cost, families could be in a stable situation and getting a running start in putting their lives together."

The damage from Hurricane Sandy revealed how many residents of coastal areas in New York, especially in Brooklyn and Queens, were renters with low incomes.

Of more than half a million households across New York and New Jersey that registered for assistance from FEMA by February, 43 percent made less than \$30,000 a year, according to studies by [Enterprise Community Partners](#) and the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) at New York University.

Some of those who have still not found permanent housing had been living in illegal basement apartments and in other living arrangements without leases or other documents needed for apartment hunting or immediate federal rental assistance. A small group, about 2 percent, are illegal immigrants and another small group has not cooperated in efforts to place them, officials testified at a City Council hearing in February.

But mostly, they are poor.

The city has encouraged those who were displaced to register with its [Housing Recovery Portal](#), which opened in early December with 2,500 vacant apartments. But as many as 80 percent of those still in hotels cannot afford the listings, according to the city's [Department of Housing Preservation and Development](#).

Advocates for homeless people and some city officials say a more effective response must be put together before the next storm. "The city may have been overly optimistic," said Councilman Brad Lander, a Brooklyn Democrat and housing expert. "You need to have emergency rental vouchers ready to be deployed."

For now, the city's hotel evacuees share the fate of other disaster survivors.

After [Hurricane Katrina](#), which destroyed a greater portion of the housing stock in New Orleans than Hurricane Sandy did in New York, thousands of residents remained in hotels for years.

"The problem with hotels is that it's not a normal life — you can't cook a meal," said Martha J. Kegel, executive director of [Unity of Greater New Orleans](#), a coalition of agencies that helped place residents. "You can't even store much food. There's going to be domestic violence because there's not enough room. It's not a good situation for people to be long-term."

Wanda Wilson, a guest of the Park Central Hotel near Times Square since February, broke down in tears twice in conversation, as if Hurricane Sandy had just hit her ground-floor studio apartment in Coney Island, which, she said, was still damaged.

Ms. Wilson, who is 29 and has a 1-year-old son and a 5-year-old daughter, said the stylish but cramped hotel room, which does not have a kitchen, had not been easy on her two children and her husband, who, she said, had been hospitalized with mental illness and is now in jail because of a fight.

For now, Ms. Wilson spends her days trying to find an apartment, home schooling her daughter, Daleena, and visiting the Disney store and Toys "R" Us in Times Square, where the Ferris wheel reminds the family of the Coney Island Boardwalk before the storm.

"The whole situation is really messed up," she said. "It's a waste of money."