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FEMA still evaluating emergency housing options

MIAMI

Disaster victims might one day watch their homes and communities be rebuilt from the cool comfort of a front porch.

The porches are a feature of prefabricated cottages designed for Hurricane Katrina's victims as an alternative to travel trailers issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

As the Katrina recovery stretches into its third year, the trailers became reviled for being too cramped, demoralizing and unhealthy. The cottages, meanwhile, proved so popular that a major home improvement retailer plans to sell them to the general public.

Now the cottages are among the alternatives being considered for emergency housing after natural disasters. Since 2006, FEMA has been compiling an inventory of prefabricated structures that can withstand hurricane-force winds and be the building blocks for a recovering neighborhood.

"Our challenge in providing disaster housing is we're required to put something out there that's good, fast and cheap, and by cheap we mean cost-effective," Jack Schuback, director of the Joint Housing Solutions Group, which is conducting the FEMA evaluations. "The real challenge is, it's extraordinarily difficult to achieve all three of those things at the same time."

Federal and state emergency management officials stress that their first choice is to house displaced residents in rental properties close to their communities. If those units aren't available or run out, that's when trailers or mobile homes have been used.

Those are Florida's current options for emergency housing, should a hurricane displace state residents this season, which begins June 1. FEMA has not decided which housing alternative it will try in the wake of the next disaster.

Trailers like the ones FEMA issued after eight hurricanes hit Florida in 2004 and 2005 are available to the state this year, said Doug Wright, the recovery chief for the state's Division of Emergency Management.

"We don't want to use them, but who knows what might have to be done if it's catastrophic," he said. "It would be up to FEMA if they allow the use of these trailers in a worst-case scenario."

More than 17,000 Florida families lived in FEMA trailers after the 2004 storms, but none reported the problems with formaldehyde discovered in the trailers issued after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, according to FEMA.

Testing showed those trailers had formaldehyde levels that were about five times greater than most modern homes. Complaints about health problems linked to formaldehyde, a preservative commonly used in building materials, started soon after people moved in.

FEMA has set new air quality standards, including formaldehyde emissions comparable to that of conventional housing, for the temporary housing units it buys for disaster victims. Some will be available this hurricane season.

Federal officials could not specify which homebuilders are being evaluated, due to government policy, but they said the designs they're considering include rudimentary shelters with no plumbing, collapsible buildings, the "Katrina cottages" already in use in the Gulf Coast and other modular units that range from pods to dormitory-style structures.

"We probably saw more variations on shipping containers than anything else," said Gerald Jones, a member of a National Institute of Building Sciences team that paired with federal officials to evaluate some units. "Some of those were kind of crude. Then again, your measure is, is this better than a tent on bare ground?"

Among the alternatives Jones' team evaluated was a "Katrina cottage" in Louisiana. Jones, a retired Kansas City, Mo., building official, liked how the cottages could be expanded with additions if residents wanted the units to become permanent homes.

"It's an interesting concept that's still in the mill," Jones said. "One problem was, it was a package of material which you really stick build, which means you have to have carpenters and people like that on the job site."

Through a FEMA grant, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency is trying out cottages and two other prefabricated models in its three coastal counties. More than 2,400 of the units currently house Katrina victims.

MEMA Director Mike Womack praised the cottages for being safe, with twice the tie-downs of conventional mobile homes, and for maintaining traditional Gulf Coast architecture with front porches and sloped roofs.

"You never know if a temporary unit has the possibility of being semi-permanent. We wanted something that would fit in for several years," Womack said.

Officials should ask whether each structure can be used for multiple disasters, said David Perkes, founding director of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, a professional outreach program of Mississippi State University's school of architecture.

The studio is helping low-income families rebuild homes lost to Katrina. Most considered moving from a FEMA travel trailer to a cottage an upgrade, but many questioned why the government spent money on a second phase of temporary housing, rather than permanent repairs to their homes.

"People thought it would extend the emergency housing period," Perkes said.

On the Net:

Federal Emergency Management Agency: <http://www.fema.gov>

Mississippi Alternative Housing Program: <http://www.ms cott age.org>

Gulf Coast Community Design Studio: <http://gccds.org/>
