## *Church Of God-Risk Management*

# Emergency Shelters

In the aftermath of Hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 Church of God churches asked about using their buildings as emergency shelters. While offering such a service is a tremendous act of compassion, please be aware that your church will face additional risks if it establishes a shelter with overnight occupancy. Examples of the risks include the following:

- Increased potential for fire due to smoking or other hazards;
- The number of exits in the building may not be adequate, and/or exits may lack proper signage and emergency lighting;
- Increased wear and tear on the facility;
- Greater chances of property damage or personal injury due to accidents, unruly guests, or human error;
- Additional strain on the facility's electrical system due to increased occupancy;
- Additional strain on the plumbing facilities;
- Greater chances of theft due to increased public access to the building; and
- The possibility of communicable disease and/or food-borne illness.

Given the potential risks of an emergency shelter here are some recommendations that can help enhance safety and prevent problems from occurring.

## Establish a Plan Before You Proceed

If the decision is made to open a shelter in a church facility, the initial planning of the project is essential to ensure safe operation.

As with any project, it is necessary to set goals based upon the resources available. For instance, do you have enough responsible people to handle the many tasks of operating a shelter? Assuming you have sufficient staff, the premises should be prepared, safety procedures should be implemented, and rules must be put in place. Please consider the following in your plan:

- Check with local officials about requirements for establishing an emergency shelter. Some localities require shower facilities or other minimum requirements.

- Consult with your local fire department concerning maximum occupancy and fire safety precautions. A good rule of thumb is 45-60 square feet of space per occupant and one toilet for every 16 persons.

- Plan ahead for evacuation of the shelter in the event of a fire or other emergency. Make sure all of your staff and volunteers understand this emergency plan.

- Clearly mark all exits and have unobstructed access in and out.

- Establish, enforce, and prominently display rules. (See basic rules on the following page.)

- Limit and secure access to other areas of the building.

- Establish oversight and supervision of the building and occupants. This is critical. Designate an employee or volunteer from the church as the supervisor of all volunteers. A supervisor should be on-site at all times and a minimum of two volunteers should be awake at all times to monitor the activity.

- Do not permit use or possession of illegal drugs, alcohol, or weapons. Unlawful or unruly activities by guests should not be allowed and the hiring of outside security may be an option to ensure safety and security of your guests, volunteers, and your building.

- Monitor each entrance and exit to the shelter at all times.

- Clarify with local officials expectations for supplying food, water, and other supplies to guests in the shelter. If the church is expected to provide food and water, make sure that an adequate supply can be obtained and that sufficient personnel will be on hand to distribute the items.

- Assure that meals in the church kitchen are prepared only under the supervision of persons trained in food safety. Follow adequate sanitation concerning food storage, preparation, and serving.

- Follow adequate sanitation procedures concerning bedding, restrooms, showers, and garbage removal. Make sure you have adequate janitorial support to handle the number of guests.

- Plan in advance how the church will respond to persons who contract a communicable disease or who become seriously ill. Contact the local health department for more information.

- Shelter hours should be established so that individuals cannot enter after a specific time. (For example, no one is allowed in after 10:00 P.M.)

- Require that all guests complete a Guest Registration Form and be given a copy of the shelter rules. Log guests in daily; and require that they sign in and out. Each guest should provide you with at least one person to contact in case of an emergency.

- Inspect and monitor interior and exterior walking surfaces to make sure they are in good condition, adequately lighted, and kept free of slip, trip, and fall hazards.

- Do not permit animals or pets in the shelter, unless they are bona fide service animals for the disabled.

- To protect children, eliminate or control any nuisance hazards that might attract children, such as discarded large appliances, unprotected equipment, open holes, wells, paths, and stairwells.

- Take special needs of your guests (elderly, wheelchairs, walkers) into consideration and plan accordingly.

- Send guests that would require medical monitoring to the proper facility.

# Rules

Basic rules for an emergency shelter should include the following:

1. No alcohol or illegal drugs are permitted on the premises.
2. No weapons of any kind are permitted on the premises.
3. No violence or verbal abuse will be tolerated.
4. No admittance after 10:00 P.M.
5. A quiet sleeping time will be maintained by 11:00 P.M.
6. No smoking in the building.
7. Children must remain with their parent(s) or guardian(s) at all times.
8. Guests must stay in the assigned room or area and cannot wander around facility.
9. Candles, camping lanterns, oil lamps, and other open flames are prohibited.
10. Individuals who violate any rules will be asked to leave the shelter.

Offering assistance in a time of need is part of many ministries. Yet by giving serious consideration to the potential risks of a shelter and then putting the proper safeguards and policies in place, your church can help ensure a safe environment for everyone involved.

Additional Resources & contact numbers:

American Red Cross: (800) 733-2767 (Seeking Disaster Assistance Option)

Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA): (800) 621-3362

Press 1 for English

Press 3 for all others