

Grim limbo for storm's nursing home evacuees in NY

December 26 2012, by David B. Caruso



In this Monday, Dec. 24, 2012, photo, an unidentified man leaves the Bishop Henry B. Hucles Episcopal Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center in New York. The facility, located in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, is one of several New York city facilities that took in hundreds of elderly and disabled New Yorkers evacuated from seaside nursing homes and assisted living residences after Superstorm Sandy. The nursing facility is swollen to nearly double its licensed capacity. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

(AP)—Hundreds of elderly and disabled who were hurriedly evacuated from New York City's seaside nursing homes and assisted living

residences after Superstorm Sandy are still in a grim limbo two months later, sleeping on cots in temporary quarters without such comforts as private bathrooms or even regular changes of clothes.

More than 6,200 residents and patients were evacuated from 47 nursing and adult care homes as a result of the Oct. 29 storm, according to New York state's Health Department.

Two thirds of those patients left after Sandy had struck, meaning many were hustled out of flooded, muck-filled buildings in such a hurry that they were unable to bring belongings or clothing. Some left without identification.

Their plight can be seen at places like the 240-bed Bishop Henry B. Hucles Episcopal Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center, which was full before they arrived and is now swollen to nearly double its licensed capacity.

Most still didn't have beds last week. Instead, they slept in rows of narrow, increasingly filthy Red Cross cots in rooms previously used for physical therapy or community activities. More than a dozen slept nightly in the nursing home's tiny chapel.

Amid the [overcrowding](#), a 69-year-old patient left the home unnoticed on Dec. 14, slipping past security measures intended to keep residents with [dementia](#) from wandering off. The facility didn't alert police for several hours. She wandered for two days before turning up unhurt at a hospital, police said.

"The circumstance could not be more dire, and people are getting the best possible care we can manage," said a staff member who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

Elsewhere in the city, many of the roughly 160 residents evacuated from the Belle Harbor Manor assisted living facility were recently moved from a hotel to a halfway house on the grounds of the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, a partly abandoned mental hospital.

Many Belle Harbor residents have been diagnosed with mild psychiatric disorders, but several complained that at the halfway house, called the Milestone Residence, they have been mixed in with more severely ill patients who were there already.

Those in the halfway house cannot have visitors in their rooms. Residents have complained about things being stolen and people banging on their doors late at night.

"It was nothing but a shock when we found out we were coming here," said Belle Harbor resident Alex Woods, 57. He said the staff has been kind but that adjusting to an institutional lifestyle has been tough.

"It's an infringement on your freedoms," he said, adding that he constantly felt "on edge."

Moments later, an administrator interrupted Woods' interview with The Associated Press and ejected a reporter from the grounds. She said residents could not meet with a reporter there without permission from the organization that manages the facility.

At least six [nursing homes](#) and six adult care homes in New York City and Long Island remained closed as of Friday because of storm damage, according to state health officials. Seven other nursing homes had accepted some patients back, but not all.

The Health Department was unable to provide the AP with a total number of people still displaced, but it said it had sent 500 adult home

residents to four temporary facilities, including the Milestone Residence.

"These operators, in concert with the state Department of Health, ensured and continue to ensure that residents' safety and care needs continue to be met," department spokesman Bill Schwarz said in an email.

He said the state had recently provided money to buy beds for the displaced Belle Harbor residents. A shipment of beds also arrived at Bishop Hucles last week.

New York state's long-term care ombudsman, Mark Miller, said his office was attempting to get inspectors out to facilities dealing with evacuees.

He said his office already had some concerns about how the evacuations were handled. Initially, he said, operators of some facilities were unreachable, leaving the families of displaced residents not knowing where relatives had been taken.

Few if any residents have been able to fetch their possessions. Some are still spending most days in the clothes they had on when they left and have to rely on donations from volunteers for changes of socks and underwear. Others have been unable to receive mail.

"The people here are kind. But there is a tone of strictness," said Belle Harbor Manor resident Miriam Eisenstein-Drachler, who holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University. "I consider myself a mentally healthy person. What am I doing here?"

Rabbi Samuel Aschkenazi, president of the nonprofit company that runs Belle Harbor Manor, told an AP reporter he had been ill and didn't know what was happening to evacuated residents. He referred questions to

another board member, who did not return a phone message.

Geoff Lieberman, executive director of the Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled, an advocacy group, said finding facilities to accept displaced people in a disaster is a challenge.

"There is no one adult home that has anywhere near the capacity that you really need to safely and comfortably accept 100 or 200 other residents," he said.

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