

# THE PALM BEACH POST

## FEMA TRAILER RESIDENTS FACE FINAL COUNTDOWN

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**Memo:** Ran all editions.

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**Illustration:** PHOTO (C & B&W)

**Caption:** ERIK M. LUNSFORD/Staff Photographer

1. (C) Mary Rothbeck faces eviction from her FEMA trailer, leaving questions whether she'll have a home Wednesday, as noted on her calendar.

2. (B&W) An assistance coalition is trying to help some area residents, including Angelo Sotomeyer of Lake Worth, find places to live.

The April 24 entry on Mary Rothbeck's calendar reads "Must vacate ..."

The April 25 entry asks "I'm homeless?"

A sketch of a palm tree adorns the square.

"This is paradise. I was thinking maybe I could live under a palm tree, but the one I drew has coconuts, and with my luck, they would fall on me," said Rothbeck, with a sardonic chuckle.

Until a couple of weeks ago, Rothbeck counted herself among the scores of people in Palm Beach County facing Tuesday's deadline set by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to move out of their government-issued trailers. That's down from 108 in January and a peak of 400.

With the help of the Palm Beach County Recovery Coalition, the 61-year-old Lake Worth woman recently learned she may receive a mobile home that will replace the one Hurricane Wilma ripped to smithereens 18 months ago.

Under guidelines FEMA developed last year, nonprofit groups and local governments can buy the mobile homes, which FEMA bought for \$20,000 to \$30,000, for \$500 and donate them to people such as Rothbeck.

She's one of the lucky ones. As of Friday, 69 people still living in FEMA housing in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties were scrambling to find a place to live, many with the help of the coalition, a nonprofit organization comprising 43 other nonprofits, government and social service agencies that joined to help disaster victims. The coalition purchased 27 mobile homes with the option to purchase 27 more. It also is providing financial assistance to 19 families so they can move into rentals and is helping another 50 families repair their homes. The money comes from grants and donations.

Some so annoyed they leave

Frustrations have mounted in the weeks leading up to Tuesday's deadline. Residents complain that they are being harassed to get out, even in instances in which FEMA knows the coalition is working to provide them with permanent homes.

"The last couple of months they have been in my face every day," said Maggie Atwood of Lake Worth, who, with help from the coalition, will be able to live in her FEMA-issued trailer permanently.

She will have to pay monthly rent on the lot and has come up with her share of the insurance money.

One caseworker said he knows of at least three people who left before the deadline because of the aggravation.

FEMA defends its actions, saying the weekly meetings were important so disaster victims knew that the day was coming when they would have to be out.

"If someone feels we have over-informed, we apologize, but we feel it's our responsibility to make sure people are fully aware of this April 24 deadline," said Joshua Wilson, a FEMA spokesman. "We would rather someone be over-informed than under-informed."

Though Wilson said no one would be thrown out, he declined to discuss FEMA's plans once the deadline passes, saying only, "We are optimistic this isn't a significant issue."

During the past few months, coalition caseworkers have spent countless hours working with those willing to help themselves, Director Sheri Taylor said. But the work is overwhelming. There's money to find; trailers to buy and, in some cases, move; utilities to be hooked up; and permits to be pulled. It all takes time, and that's something the coalition hasn't had.

Until a couple of months ago, FEMA, citing privacy laws, refused to provide her agency with ways to reach those in need. It wasn't until about 15 months into the process that FEMA relented.

"They played hardball about getting us any lists," said John Tatum, manager of the Palm Beach County Recovery and Mitigation Program.

"It's a catastrophic situation. We can't wait until the last 45 or 30 days before the deadline," said Tatum, whose office acts as a liaison between the state and

county and FEMA.

Self-help still crucial

Taylor's job has been to make sure no one falls between the cracks.

Rothbeck, who is blind in one eye and has a heart condition, was close to falling through a huge crevice. In tears, she recounted how she scrounged to save the \$11,000 it would cost to buy a mobile home from FEMA, only to learn as the deadline neared that she also needed another \$8,000 to have it moved to her lot at Palm Beach Mobile Home Park in Lake Worth and get all of the utilities and permits required.

"I was terrified. I have never been homeless a day in my life. I try not to think about it because when I do, I start to cry," Rothbeck said.

Last week, her tears became tears of joy when Rothbeck learned the coalition would donate the trailer to her.

But what of those who have done nothing to help themselves? There are nine at Taylor's last count. For them, there will be no help.

"Time is of the essence. If it's not fruitful, we have to let these families go," Taylor said.

Others have tried unsuccessfully to help themselves, including Angelo Sotomeyer, who turned to the coalition only when it became clear he would not be able to make it on his own.

The 43-year-old Lake Worth man, his wife and teenage son have spent the past 17 months sleeping in a cramped travel trailer. Another son lives with his grandmother.

Sotomeyer's quaint home, built in 1952, stands just across the street from Lake Osborne. Nothing stood between his home and the lake when Wilma blew in.

"It was frightening," he said. "You could hear the wood tearing away. Because we face the lake, we got all of that damage."

A torn roof and water damage festered, going from bad to horrendous, while Sotomeyer battled with his insurance company. His home is now rat- and mold-infested.

With the money Sotomeyer has cobbled together, he has done some of the repairs himself, while holding down a full-time job.

"I try to do the best I can with the little money I have," he said.

The coalition recently stepped in and is trying to help Sotomeyer keep his trailer while he makes repairs.

With the next hurricane season less than two months away, emergency officials hope everyone learned from the active storm seasons of 2004 and 2005.

"This has been a learning curve," Tatum said. "We would like to start working

with people earlier. I don't know why that should be impossible."

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How many need, have gotten housing

For 18 months FEMA has housed hundreds of Florida residents whose homes Hurricane Wilmadamaged or destroyed. With Tuesday's deadline looming, there are still people whose future is uncertain.

People still living in FEMA-issued housing:

Palm Beach County: 44, down from 108 in January

Martin County: 11, down from 14 in January

St. Lucie County:14, down from 28 in January

FEMA sales of mobile homes to Wilma victims

Palm Beach County: 45

Martin County: 11

St. Lucie County:Two

Under FEMA's donation program, the units can be sold to local governments or nonprofit organizations for \$500, or to individuals. Since the program's inception after the 2004 storms, FEMA has donated or sold about 600 units to those groups.Salesgenerated \$22 million in 2005; \$14 million in 2004; and \$5.5 million in 2007.

Information provided by FEMA as of April 20

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