



Mitigation Helps Senior Center Survive Katrina

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Hancock County, Mississippi

Bay St. Louis, MS – Storms shutters and other mitigation measures helped the Hancock County Senior Center survive Hurricane Katrina (2005) and serve as a safe haven for the members of the community for 88 days after the storm.



The Center, located only two blocks from the Gulf of Mexico, was retrofitted with storm shutters in 1999 after an assessment determined that high winds could blow out its glass windows and doors. The project was partially funded by FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The grant was administered by the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. Following a major disaster declaration, the HMGP funds up to 75 percent of the eligible costs of a project that will reduce or eliminate damages from future natural hazard events.

"The reason we got the shutters is because, besides being a senior center, we are a special needs shelter and we would open up whenever there was a storm," said Arlene Johnson, Director of the Hancock County Senior Center. "We would take 25 patients and 25 care givers. We normally have nurses and supplies from the hospital that would come and set us up to ride out a storm."

The Center was ordered to evacuate on August 29, 2005, as Hurricane Katrina approached. "The shelter coordinator came and told us that the buoys were indicating that the storm was going to be worse than everyone had first thought. I told him that we would evacuate everyone else but I wasn't leaving," Ms. Johnson said.

Center staff then worked to ensure that senior citizens who use the center had somewhere safe to go. Ms. Johnson then told the staff to evacuate while she and 12 members of her family took shelter in the building.

"I really felt like the building would be safe for us. The building is new and constructed with all of the hurricane straps it was supposed to have. It was built on the highest point of ground in Bay St. Louis, and it has hurricane shutters and a generator," Ms. Johnson explained.

After making preparations and ensuring that hurricane shutters covered all the windows and doors, Ms. Johnson and her family huddled inside the building as Hurricane Katrina hit the area with 135 mile per hour winds. "We cranked the shutters up a little bit to see out and saw things like shingles and insulation and boards from buildings flying by," Ms. Johnson recalled.

Ms. Johnson later discovered that the Center's storm shutters were dented by flying debris, but had passed the test by protecting glass windows and doors of the nine-year-old building.

The Center's roof also sustained some damage but remained intact thanks to hurricane straps that secured it to the outer walls. Windows and doors were not breached by wind or flying debris, and consequently there was no uplift on the roof.

Nearby houses and apartments were flooded by the 30-foot storm surge that devastated the city, but less than an inch of water came under the doors of the Center.

"During the storm, we were watching out of the back of the building, and all of a sudden we saw the water coming up really fast. And when this happened we saw the people trying to get out of their houses and apartments as the water rose," Ms. Johnson remembered. "It happened so fast and we saw them trying to get out of the water, so my family and I went out to try to help people get into the building."

It was at that moment that Ms. Johnson decided to open the Center as a shelter to hurricane victims.

"People needed some place to go," she said. "We got all of the people over in this area in, and by that time we did that, the people that were rescued by the air boats started coming in. There was no place else for them to go, and this was one of the only places still standing and not under water. We welcomed everyone that came."

The Center eventually housed more than 200 people and operated as a shelter for 88 days. "We had a long road and we traveled it," Ms. Johnson said proudly. "I never dreamed I would have to open the Center as a shelter and have to stay open for so long."

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

State: **Mississippi**

County: **Hancock County**

City/Community: **Bay Saint Louis**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Retrofitting, Structural**

Structure Type: **Masonry, Reinforced**

Activity/Project Start Date: **06/1999**

Activity/Project End Date: **07/1999**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **HANCOCK COUNTY SENIOR CITIZENS CENTER**

Application/Project Number: **9999**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Non FEMA Cost: **0**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2005**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/hmgp/index.shtm>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.msema.org>

Main Points

- The Hancock County Senior Center was retrofitted with storm shutters in 1999 after an assessment determined that high winds could blow out its glass windows and doors.
- The project was partially funded by FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.
- Less than an inch of water came under the doors of the Center, while nearby structures were devastated by the storm surge.
- After Hurricane Katrina, the Center eventually housed more than 200 people and operated as a shelter for 88 days.



Arlene Johnson, Director of the Hancock County Senior Center.



Storm shutters protected the Center from wind and debris.