

Floods Bring Wave Of Support

Facility Given Surprising, But Fortuitous, Evacuation Site

It was not simply fate that an unoccupied 50-bed nursing facility practically fell into Tim Hager's lap shortly after state officials ordered him to evacuate his facility, the Elim Rehab and Care Center, a 120-bed nursing facility in Fargo, N.D. Hager, who is Elim's administrator, believes it was an act of God.

Thanks to spring thaw and heavy rains, the Red River of the North, which is several miles east of Elim, had crested and begun saturating homes and businesses.

Elim had not flooded, but its highly vulnerable location made it one of the first long term care facilities to receive evacuation orders. At least a dozen providers in the area eventually evacuated more than 1,400 residents in advance of the river's crest over the course of two days, on March 25 and 26.

For Hager, it was almost too good to be true—49 residents would go to a recently vacated nursing facility in Steele, N.D., already equipped with beds, fresh linens, a kitchen stocked with pots and pans, plenty of televisions, and working laundry facilities, all waiting for him, his staff, and residents to breathe life back into it.

"It was the most amazing part of it," he says. "It was virtually like we walked into a facility that had been vacated the day before."

Evacuating Elim was quite a feat logistically, says Joyce Eisenbraun, Elim's director of marketing. "Moving those residents to Steele was very important to us," she says, adding that the move could not have been successful without

the dedication of the staff. Eisenbraun was impressed by the response to a call for volunteers. "Watching what happened once we were told to evacuate was so neat," says Eisenbraun. "Tim asked for volunteers to go with the residents to the Steele facility, but he said he understood that many had families

and his crew had arrived. "We had the supplies and med carts ready and the computers set up with Internet and e-mail," Hager says. "The IT person at the Elim's headquarters had even driven from Minneapolis to help us with the computers."

Also noteworthy, says Hager, was the fact that Elim's chief operating officer and chief executive officer had driven through the night from Minneapolis to coordinate evacuation efforts in Fargo while Hager set up shop in Steele.

Upon arrival at the Steele facility, the Elim contingent was greeted with coffee and cookies, courtesy of the building's owner—Medcenter One, in Bismarck.

A little more than 24 hours after their arrival, 26 or so staff members and 49 residents were comfortably ensconced in their temporary shelter and running it like it was their own facility.

Empowering staff and treating them with respect is one reason why the evacuations went so smoothly, says Hager. "I told them, 'This is your work assignment—whatever needs to be done.'"

After taking care of the residents, the nurse assistants pitched in to do laundry, vacuuming, and even cleaning toilets, Hager says. "I put on a nametag that says 'gopher' and told them to ask me for whatever they needed."

Hager and two other staff members bunked on mattresses in their respective offices, while others stayed at a local motel.

From the moment he arrived at the "Steele campus," Hager was duly

impressed with the support he and staff received from the surrounding community. The building's previous maintenance person met Hager at the facility to show him how to operate the machinery. "He came with his wife, who is also a former employee, and showed us how to do the laundry," Hager says.

Steele's mayor also paid a visit and extended a helping hand. "He sat down with us and said, 'If there's anything you need, call me,'" Hager says. "I told him we needed another computer so staff could check e-mail, and he came back a half-hour later with a computer and said it was ours while we were there."

Shelly Peterson, president of the North Dakota Long Term Care Association, spent an exhausting week coordinating evacuation efforts in conjunction with state and city emergency officials. Daily conference calls with providers and emergency management officials to communicate flood updates, daily bed counts, and special needs were just a small part of the effort that went into the efficient evacuation efforts, according to Peterson.

"Displaced long term care residents were safely disbursed to 48 nursing facilities, 11 acute care facilities, and two church shelters," says Peterson. "It's amazing when you think about it ... how well it went, despite two blizzards and poor road conditions."

Facilities in Moorhead, Minn., just across the river from Fargo, were also hit by the floods. Although only a handful of long term care facilities in the state were evacuated, Doug Beardsley, Care Providers of Minnesota director of membership, says that many prepared for the possibility but were able to shelter in place, "which is the best scenario," he says.

The evacuations would not have gone as well as they did if not for the character of the staff, Hager concludes. "If you have an operation that's well managed and cares about staff, they'll give you 100 percent with a smile," he says. And that's what he got.



Elim Rehab and Care evacuates residents during the recent flood.

at home and couldn't go."

But by the end of the meeting, the number of staff members volunteering to go with the residents to Steele was "overwhelming," Eisenbraun says. "It was amazing to watch."

One unit manager was so eager to help out, she left her husband behind to stand guard over her own flood-threatened home.

Once staff had loaded med carts, computers, and other supplies onto the moving truck, they took the first of two 140-mile trips east to Steele.

Elim's food vendor also sent a truck directly to Steele after hearing of their situation.

The city lined up vehicles for transporting residents, who began arriving in Steele just 24 hours after Hager