

## **Shelter Transition Team**

Once it was determined that most of the shelter residents had registered with FEMA, a Shelter Transition Team was created to assist with de-populating the shelters. At the time these teams were formed, there were only two shelters open, one in Birmingham and one in Tuscaloosa. The team in Birmingham was comprised of representatives from FEMA, American Red Cross, Birmingham Housing Authority, local homeless shelters, and the interfaith association. During the two days the shelter transition team was operational in Birmingham, the team was able to place all 20 households residing in the shelter with more permanent long term housing, several of which were placed in better situations than before the storm.

The Tuscaloosa shelter proved to be a larger challenge than Birmingham. The issue was the Salvation Army homeless shelter (the only homeless shelter in town) was destroyed by the storm. Due to the lack of a homeless shelter, many shelter residents that would have been referred to the Salvation Army, were housed in the American Red Cross because there was nowhere else for them to reside. Two weeks into the shelter operation, a shelter transition team was developed. The team included representatives from FEMA, American Red Cross, Tuscaloosa Housing Authority, HUD, and the faith-based community. The team also identified three Masters of Social Work graduates from the University of Alabama to work as case managers for the shelter residents. Over the next month, the shelter transition team worked with 148 households to develop long term housing plans. Through the work of the transition team, all of the households were placed in more permanent housing solutions prior to the shelter closing. Even now, the case workers are continuing to work with the shelter residents as they assist them through the long term recovery process.

The mission of the shelter transition team was to advance the residents in their disaster recovery. One such story is that of "Joe". Joe made a poor decision in his past and had spent a few years in prison. After getting out of prison, Joe had managed to get a job and was working hard to make a new start. He had tried for more than a year to secure his own housing, but due to his criminal background, no one was willing to rent to him. As a result, Joe had been living in the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter. During the storm, the shelter was destroyed and Joe lost what little bit of stability he had secured for himself. While staying at the Belk Center Shelter, Joe began to work with the shelter transition team. For weeks, the team worked to place Joe in more permanent housing, but the team also kept running into the hurdle of this past. Through it all, Joe kept saying that we wouldn't get his hopes up, because he was always let down. While a difficult challenge, the team was determined to turn this horrific event into a stepping stone for Joe to better himself. Through sheer determination, the team was able to secure permanent housing for Joe in the final week of the shelter being opened. For the first time in his life, he had his own place and his own lease. With the help of the faith based community, Joe's apartment was furnished and he was cooking his own meals. Because of the shelter transition team, Joe not only transitioned from a cot to a bed, but more importantly, he transitioned into a new lease on life.

The work and success of the shelter transition team could best be summarized by Tuscaloosa Mayor, Walter Maddox, "The needs of our citizens are not limited to political or geographical boundaries; therefore, our assistance must not be done in isolation. To that end, the City and FEMA established a

Shelter Transition Team that incorporated all our stakeholders in a united effort to help all of our citizens begin a long-term recovery. We serve citizens and not statistics and our partnership with FEMA demonstrated this deeply held belief.”