



KIM PORTER via AP

People live in tents in Rockport, Texas, this month. About 7,900 Hurricane Harvey survivors in Texas are in need of some type of temporary housing assistance, FEMA says.

FEMA sells disaster trailers cheaply even though storm victims still need housing

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FORT WORTH, TEXAS

The federal government typically spends up to \$150,000 apiece — not counting utilities, maintenance, or labor — on the trailers it leases to disaster victims, then auctions them at cut-rate prices after 18 months of use or the first sign of minor damage, The Associated Press has learned.

Officials have continued the practice even amid a temporary housing shortage in Texas, where almost 8,000 applicants are still awaiting federal support nearly four months after Hurricane Harvey landed in the Gulf Coast.

The Federal Emergency

Management Agency briefly halted trailer sales following Harvey but resumed them in November, online records show. Since then, at least 115 units manufactured this year have been sold for pennies on the dollar, and many of the online auctions have listed such things as dirty mattresses, missing furniture, pet odors, or loose trim as the lone damage.

“I don’t care what shape it’s in, it beats sleeping on a dirt floor,” said Christy Combs, who moved with her husband, four children, and five dogs into a tent after their rented apartment in Aransas Pass, Texas, was left uninhabitable by floodwater.

FEMA has no written policy or regulation requiring disposal of used trailers, but an official confirmed to AP that it’s a longstanding in-

ternal policy and that seldom are the housing units given to another family in need after the initial 18-month stint.

“Because of the challenges associated with damaged units, and the costs of life-cycle maintenance, and because we are required to maintain a ready reserve for disasters, FEMA, by practice, doesn’t return used units to our reserve inventory,” said Jenny Burke, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which oversees FEMA.

Burke was unable to explain why FEMA leases new units for only 18 months before consigning them to the General Services Administration’s online auction.

The agency’s experience after Hurricane Katrina in

2005 could provide one explanation for a strict policy governing what kind of housing can go to storm victims. Some 144,000 FEMA trailers became symbols of the troubled federal response after some victims who lived in them for years won millions of dollars from lawsuits claiming the units leached high levels of cancer-causing formaldehyde.

FEMA spokesman Bob Howard stressed the units being used now are much higher quality than those and don’t have formaldehyde problems, meeting U.S. Housing and Urban Development standards for mobile homes.

Harvey survivors in Texas have received 859 trailers so far, but another some 7,900 applicants are in need of some type of temporary housing assistance, Howard said.

FEMA’s policy of selling off its used trailers left the agency with a standing inventory of only 1,700 units as an unusually-active hurricane season battered southeast Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands this year.

Federal records show that FEMA has awarded about \$278 million in competitive-bid contracts to trailer manufacturers even as it has continued to sell off used units. One record showed an expected delivery date of February 2018.

In September, when AP first reported on the auctions, officials said the units sold had all been used to house people who endured the 2016 floods in southern Louisiana and returned the units with damage that made them unfit for re-deployment.

More than 100 2017-model trailers were sold in the two days leading up to Harvey’s landfall Aug. 25, the AP reported.

On Aug. 28, FEMA ordered the auctions halted “to evaluate the overall condition of recently deactivated units,” said Burke, adding that some were even-

tually deployed to support disaster response, although none that “required refurbishment.”

“If you’re living in a tent, you really don’t care about the trim,” said Samantha McCrary, who is the owner of a catering business in Rockport, Texas, and since the storm hit Aug. 25 has allowed people to camp on her 3.5-acre property.

At its height, the Rockport Relief Camp hosted around 80 people in tents and trailers, and served 1,000 meals per day.

McCrary, her husband, and other southeast Texas volunteers have accepted donated used trailers and fixed them up for tent-dwellers.

“They’re rough, but the water and the heat works. They’ve got plywood for a windshield, plywood for doors, and people are thrilled to death to get them,” McCrary said.

Among the beneficiaries was Combs, who said she was denied temporary housing assistance by FEMA.

“Whether you have children or not, living in a tent for any amount of time when you have been turned down by the government is very heartbreaking,” she said.

Other slightly used FEMA trailers have resurfaced on Craigslist.

A Harvey survivor in Houston is living in a 2017-model trailer that her church pooled money to buy from retired North Texas fire chief Shan English. English purchased it for \$10,000 in June from the online auction site and advertised it on Craigslist for \$18,000.

“It was a brand new unit that hadn’t been lived in. They bought it and set it up for her — she’s just as happy as you can imagine,” English said.

The five trailers that English purchased were all in mint condition, he added. “The floors are rock-solid, it’s well-insulated, very well-built, and they come fully furnished, too.”