

Judge Orders Extension of Hotel Program for Hurricane Sandy Evacuees

By Mireya Navarro

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It has been nearly seven months since Hurricane Sandy struck, but a state court judge ruled on Wednesday that New York City cannot end its hotel program for evacuees just yet.

The ruling provides a reprieve for about 900 people in 375 displaced households across the city who remain in 45 hotels. New York City officials had set a May 31 deadline for ending hotel accommodations, saying that most of the residents already had plans to move into new homes.

Officials said they had exhausted efforts to find permanent housing for a hard-to-place group of 156 households. Advocates for storm victims argued that many of them were in danger of being tossed onto the streets or into homeless shelters if the hotel program ended.

In her written decision, Justice Margaret A. Chan questioned the city's timing and said that it "does not seem reasonable" to end the hotel program just as New York is getting approximately \$1.8 billion in federal storm recovery aid. The amount includes \$9 million for rental subsidies for up to 24 months, intended mostly for low-income residents and people at risk of homelessness.

The city said it would appeal the decision.

"We recognize the enormous challenges that people have faced following Hurricane Sandy," Christina Hoggan, a senior counsel with the city's Law Department, said in a written statement. "But the program was never intended to — and cannot — continue indefinitely."

She said the court's decision "will limit the city's ability to flexibly respond to future tragedies."

The city placed more than 3,100 people in hotels after the storm as it sought to keep them out of shelters. Most of the evacuees were able to eventually return to repaired homes or secure moves into public housing apartments or other permanent housing. But many others were too poor, with no home to return to and not enough income to qualify for available apartments.

Speaking at a City Council hearing in late April, the commissioner of homeless services, Seth Diamond, said that the hard-to-place evacuees had either rejected the housing options offered to them or had criminal records, insufficient income and other issues that make them ineligible for the available housing. He imposed an April 30 deadline for them to move out of the hotels, which was later extended after the Legal Aid Society sued the city to prevent the evictions.

Judith Goldiner, who handled the case for the organization, said the city must now speed up the distribution of rental vouchers to assist all the evacuees in securing a home. "In a couple of months everyone could be out of the hotels," she said.

The hotel program has cost more than \$60 million so far but the city expects to be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for most of the expense.

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