



VICTOR CALHOUN/Staff Photographer

Ruth Belasco sits with her son, Jamie Dupree, a quadriplegic who has a rare form of muscular dystrophy. Because he depends on a ventilator, Dupree would qualify to stay at the new special needs shelter in Mobile County that will open in times of disaster, emergency planners said.

HURRICANE SEASON 2011

Last-resort shelters help those with special needs

By CASANDRA ANDREWS
Staff Reporter

After the fright and devastation of storms like Katrina, coastal Alabama planners focused new energies on finding and establishing shelters for special-need evacuees and their caretakers.

Now, in addition to a medical needs shelter, Mobile County has designated Collins Road Elementary School in the Eight Mile area as a special-needs shelter during times of emergency.

Plans call for opening the school to those with extensive physical and intellectual disabilities, who may be accompanied by a qualified caregiver and family members.

Only a limited number of people can stay there, planners said, so it's critical for families to create disaster preparedness strategies well in advance.

"If people plan well, there's going to be a lot less chaos," said Monica Knight, a county Health Department director who serves on the task force set up to develop the new shelter. "If they have the chance to get out of Dodge, they should take it."

People who may qualify to stay in a special needs shelter include those needing mechanical assistance, such as a lift chair, and those on ventilators.

A registry has been created to help

MISSISSIPPI SHELTER

In Mississippi's Jackson County, one special medical needs shelter operates at the East Central Community Center on Miss. 614 in Wade, said Donald Langham, director of the county's Emergency Management Agency.

The American Red Cross manages that shelter, which can accommodate 60 patients and 60 caregivers, Langham said. To pre-register for the shelter, call the Red Cross in Pascagoula at 228-762-2455.

identify people in the county with significant special needs. To sign up, call Todd Perkins or Leslie Largent at

251-479-4900, or go to www.disaster-helpmobile.com.

It's important to note, Knight said, that everyone who becomes part of the registry may not have a place at the special-needs shelter: "It's not a reservation," she said.

In Baldwin County, several shelters of last resort can open during emergencies. Some would accommodate those requiring electricity to survive, and some would accept those with mild to moderate health issues, said Scott Wallace, shelter coordinator.

To stay in one of the shelters, an evacuee would have to be accompanied by a qualified caregiver, Wallace said.

The county website — www.baldwincounty.gov — offers a complete list of Baldwin shelters. They're available under the emergency management icon.

"We're trying to look at having more capabilities throughout the state," said Theresa Porter, emergency preparedness coordinator for public health Area 9, which includes Baldwin County. "We've never been overwhelmed, but it depends on what the storms are like."

Also in Baldwin, a special-needs shelter, built to withstand 200-mph winds, serves members of the Baldwin County Association for Retarded Citizens.