

Little Sisters of the Poor awaiting \$1.4 million from FEMA

MOBILE, Ala. – Almost 18 months after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the Little Sisters of the Poor still have not received a \$1.4 million reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for first responders' emergency use of Mary Joseph Residence for the Elderly in New Orleans after the hurricane.

FEMA announced Jan. 17 that it had allocated the money to reimburse the nuns, but clearance to release the funds had to go through local government channels, a time-consuming bureaucratic process.

The nursing home's 80 residents had been evacuated before the hurricane hit. Before they could return, New Orleans firefighters commandeered the facility, which escaped flooding. It was used as an emergency operations center and as a shelter for firefighters, police and members of the National Guard. When the levees broke the day after the hurricane, two-thirds of the city's firehouses were flooded.

Sister Paul Wilson, former superior of the sisters' New Orleans community and now superior of the nine sisters who operate the Sacred Heart Residence in Mobile, told Catholic News Service by telephone Feb. 8 that just the day before a volunteer drove to Mobile with five contracts New Orleans officials required as part of the process. She signed them and the volunteer then drove straight back to New Orleans and hand-delivered them to city officials that afternoon.

The next morning, shortly before she spoke to CNS, she learned that city attorneys reviewing the signed contracts found a mistake and called to tell her they would have to redo them, "and if you want, we'll FedEx them overnight and they'll get to you tomorrow."

"I said no, I don't want them FedExed overnight because that means they won't get to the mayor on Friday (Feb. 9), they'll get to the mayor on Monday," she said. "So their driver is taking them back to our home in New Orleans, and from there another volunteer is going to drive them over this afternoon to Mobile. Then he's going to

turn around and drive them back to New Orleans after I sign them, and hopefully they'll be on the mayor's desk tomorrow morning."

"That does not mean we have the money," she added, saying that she expected it might still take a couple of weeks.

Mary Joseph Residence for the Elderly, a 135-bed facility, was built in the 1970s and was in need of renovation, she said, and before Katrina the sisters were planning to close it eventually - one of the reasons they were down to 80 residents just before the hurricane.

When the displaced residents could not be brought back to that home after Katrina, the sisters settled them in some of the other 30 nursing homes they run around the country; about 30 moved to Sacred Heart Residence in Mobile, which currently has a total of 86 residents, she said.

Sister Paul said the \$1.4 million from FEMA will not cover the entire debt on the New Orleans home that has accumulated since Katrina, which is about \$2 million.

She said it costs about \$80,000 a month to maintain the building even when it is not occupied.

Maintenance workers have to care for the building and grounds, and in humid New Orleans it has to be fully air-conditioned year round to prevent mold and mildew, she said.

Sister Paul said the property has been put up for sale. She would not quote the asking price but said the sisters expect to get enough to pay off the remaining debt.

She said the Little Sisters of the Poor had been in New Orleans for 127 years. Although they will no longer have a residence there, they continue to maintain some presence, she said.

"Part of our apostolate is begging," so every month a couple of the sisters go from Mobile to New Orleans to meet donors and seek support, she said. She said the sisters also have a number of lay associates in the city.