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Tent cities put up stakes in Beaumont

By Dan Wallach <mailto:dwallach@hearstnp.com>

David Seyler tooled around Babe Zaharias Park in Beaumont on a golf cart, weaving around parked truck trailers.

He pointed out which ones are bunkhouses and which are for laundry or showers. He pointed out a pitched tent.

"We can feed 500 to 1,000 people an hour in there," he said.

Welcome to one of 18 such sites around Southeast Texas, where Entergy Texas has created small cities to support its 14,000 restoration workers.

These are the sites the utility workers in the neighborhoods depend on for sleeping, their meals, their laundry, and everything else that an army in the field needs to survive.

"We liken it to putting an army division in the field in three days," said Seyler, whose regular job is street lighting coordinator for Entergy Mississippi in Madison, Miss.

The longest stretch he's ever worked on one of these restoration operations is 50 straight days for the Katrina-Rita recovery in 2005. So far, he's worked 22 days straight, including three or four days ahead of Hurricane Gustav's landfall during the Labor Day weekend. He finished up in the Gustav-hit areas and traveled to Beaumont to help set up here.

"We appreciate the people of Beaumont for letting us use this site," he said. "It's level. It has a hard pavement. It's a good site."

Entergy has contracted with a company called Storm Services that provides the actual equipment, contractors, and services that comprise the small city within a city.

As Seyler wheeled his golf cart around the site; always at a safe speed; he said, "This is one of the most integral parts of the operation."

He pulled up at the trailer holding the washers and dryers. The washing machines lined one side and the dryers were on the other.

Wendy Thomas of Seymour, Mo., Christina Turney of Mountain Grove, Mo., and Gena Flores of Springville, Mo., were in charge of the ongoing work.

Thomas and Turney, both of whom are certified as tractor-trailer drivers, decided to help out in the recovery.

The laundry is capable of washing 384 loads a day, 24 hours a day. Utility workers bag up their laundry; sleeping trailers 1-15 on Wednesday; 16-30 on Thursday; 31-45 on Friday; and 46-59 on Saturday; then the rotation begins anew.

At first, the laundry crew used city water, which was unusable because of salt water intrusion from the storm surge up the Neches River. They had to wait for fresh water trucks to purge the system and have been using trucked-in water ever since.

Thomas, Turney and Flores will wash clothes for 1,800-plus people when the site is fully staffed.

How do they keep the clothes straight?

"All of it labeled. We tape a card to the washing machine, and then move the card to the dryer, than put the card in the bag with the finished laundry," Thomas said.

The women's' bunks and in the laundry truck served as platforms for bags of laundry. The bunks for the workers are three tiers high, lining each side of a trailer. Each trailer accommodates 30 men.

There are 200 portable toilets, one for every 10 people. They are serviced every day. There are hand-washing stations, serviced two or three times a day. There a half-dozen tractor-trailers laden with food. There are deliveries throughout the day and night of food, ice, water and soft drinks.

And there is fuel. Tankers bring it in, park near the Central High School Jaguars football stadium and dispense to thirsty vehicles. "The smell of diesel," Seyler said. "It smells like lights on."

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