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## **Mega-Shelters and the Role of the Public Assembly Venue**

There are many different ways to provide service to those needing shelter prior to, during, and after a disaster. When thousands of individuals in a community are impacted by a disaster, a large mass care shelter may be a suitable option or the best way to serve those affected. These shelters are usually referred to as mega-shelters and generally accommodate a significant number of people.

The defining characteristics of mega-sheltering are:

- Multi-agency coordination and management with a unified command system activated by government;
- Large, non-conventional sheltering facility - often those generally used for public assembly such as an arena, convention center, or stadium;
- Accommodate clients with longer-term needs beyond evacuation sheltering.

Shelters of this size and magnitude function as small cities and demand the elements of governmental and community support that keep such “cities” safe and well. They become multi-agency programs with the venues serving a central and important role. Typically, neither the venue nor the American Red Cross opens and operates these sites on its own. Rather, the venue and the Red Cross partner with a variety of entities including various government and non-profit agencies, emergency management and human and social services to plan for and operate mega-shelters. Mega-shelters should be opened under the administration of either local or state government because running these large shelter facilities requires the coordination and cooperation of multiple local and state agencies including those of law enforcement, public health, social and human services, food service, and facility management. These governmental agencies can run unified command systems and suggest specific tasks, appropriate to the various agencies, vendors, and organizations (including the venue and the American Red Cross) that contribute to the overall mission.

In discussing mega-shelters within a community, it is crucial that venue management determine the operational structure, table of organization, and roles and responsibilities for the shelters prior to a disaster incident. Specifics regarding site management, food service, shelter resident privacy and confidentiality, media relations, and other details must also be addressed in the planning stages. All involved agencies must be included in the planning of mega-shelters so that all identified parties understand their roles and responsibilities and those of the other agencies.

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IAAM facilities and their management, in conjunction with the American Red Cross, have an integral role to serve in planning for and operating mega-shelters. This planning will significantly benefit the impacted community. To assist venues in this process, IAAM, in conjunction with the Red Cross, has developed a template Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for venues and Red Cross chapters and a Mega-Shelter Framework (list of roles for assignment of specific responsibility) Appendix. These documents will help establish a relationship and build a framework for which the operation of a mega-shelter can be based. The venue manager can use these to begin or enhance their planning for mega-shelter operations at their facility. The venue manager can also take advantage of the Red Cross' significant sheltering expertise by including their local Red Cross Chapter in the mega-shelter planning process.

Preparedness begins with planning. Establish a relationship with your local Red Cross Chapter using the template MOU and build a framework for the operation of a mega-shelter in your community.