

"This is our space," Cudnick said, gesturing to the empty expanse of the gym. "It's not much to look at."

But with plenty of room, locker-room facilities and a dining area for meals, the FIU recreation center makes an excellent short-term shelter, he said.

"We could probably handle 3,000 or 4,000 people if we had to," Cudnick said.

Most of the local Red Cross shelter volunteers stayed in the Keys this week to staff local emergency shelters, he said. "Our Red Cross volunteers are out there doing something every day," Cudnick said. "It just doesn't show up in the paper."

County Fire Rescue staff "does a whale of a job" with the severely ill or infirm patients they evacuated, Cudnick said. "They deserve a lot of recognition."

In the most recent Keys evacuation before Fay, 21 special-needs patients were housed at the FIU shelter.

With no one else in the gym, Scouts burned off energy playing basketball and throwing a football. Portable DVD players, MP3 players and video games saw plenty of use.

Scout Drew Kellum celebrated his 15th birthday at the shelter Monday. A small ice-cream cake was brought in for the occasion.

"We've been treated exceptionally well," said his dad Brent, the scoutmaster. "They've been feeding us well, and these boys can eat. We had a Cuban dinner, which was great. We have like one Cuban restaurant in Minnesota."

Even though they had to leave Sea Base early, the Scouts had no regrets about their Keys sojourn.

"Except for getting stuck [in Sunday's slow evacuation traffic], it's been a wonderful experience," Kellum said. "The diving is a lot better in the Keys than in Minnesota."



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