



Disaster Accountability Project

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RE: Committee on Homeland Security Hearing, “FEMA Housing: An Examination of Current Problems and Innovative Solutions”

Dear Chairman Thompson:

The Disaster Accountability Project (DAP) thanks you and your colleagues for holding this hearing on FEMA housing issues. We respectfully submit the following recommendations as testimony today.

FEMA must make the creation of the Joint Housing Task Force an immediate priority to bring the National Disaster Housing Strategy (NDHS) into compliance with 6 U.S.C. §772.

On January 16, 2009 the Bush administration published an updated version of the National Disaster Housing Strategy (NDHS). While the 2009 Strategy does more closely follow the instructions given in the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA)[\[1\]](#) through its annexes, it is not complete. Also, it is not ready to be implemented. The idealistic and holistic concepts outlined in the NDHS rely on a joint housing task force made up of “local, State, nongovernmental and private-sector entities” for implementation.[\[2\]](#) This task force has not yet been established and is lacking a permanent chairperson[\[3\]](#), leaving the same level of uncertainty in interim housing that existed during Katrina. The creation and action of this task force are crucial for needed planning and preparation for future disasters causing displaced persons.

QUESTION 1: *The National Disaster Housing Strategy is a general document that relies heavily on a joint task force for further implementation. What is the status of this housing task force? Is there a timeline?*

Interagency Coordination

It is evident from the response to Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters that the realities of post-disaster housing need were not adequately anticipated. Coordination was severely lacking amongst federal agencies as well as with private sector individuals and organizations who provide multi-family residential housing units. In addition to the problems with trailers, both in supply and location[\[4\]](#), FEMA failed to take advantage of housing stock offered by other agencies including the VA, USDA, and HUD, as well as

units offered by the private sector. As a result, residents were housed on cruise ships and in trailers often contrary their own preferences, further exacerbating the stress felt by many individuals and families.[5]

As a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, FEMA and HUD entered into an Interagency Agreement (IAA) in July 2006, which created the pilot Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP).[6] Again in late September of 2008 FEMA and HUD signed another interagency agreement to work together to administer the Disaster Housing Assistance Program – Ike (DHAP-Ike).[7] While these agreements are an important start, they do not go far enough to ensure that victims of future disasters will have adequate access to available interim and permanent housing stock. These agreements are made on an ad hoc basis and a permanent standard does not yet exist.[8] **FEMA and HUD, in particular, must work together to create a comprehensive system for interim housing establishing a permanent policy to foster interagency coordination.**

QUESTION 2: *In the future how does FEMA plan on working with HUD to assure maximization of housing offered by other agencies? Additionally how does FEMA intend to create more stable interim housing options in the future?*

Rental repair must be a priority. Safe and available housing is a major factor in reconnecting communities after a disaster, setting the stage for successful long term recovery.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and subsequent storms, available funds were heavily directed towards temporary housing, including trailers, which individually cost over \$59,000.[9] There was far less of a focus on repair of existing structures, in order to return residents to permanent housing. Many Gulf-Coast residents tried to use available funds to rebuild, rather than continue to live in temporary housing but many were denied access to funds or faced complicated bureaucracy.[10] This was particularly a problem with rental housing. Many landlords struggled in their attempts to rebuild, due in large part to a lack of funding and in turn many residents who did not own property found fewer locations to rent. The lack of emphasis on repair has been attributed to confusion with authorization contained in Section 408 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

The Rental Repair Pilot Program established in the PKEMRA, which “funded repairs to multi-family rental housing units due to disaster-related damages” in exchange for an agreement to make units available to disaster applicants[11], expired in December 2008[12] further complicating rebuilding efforts. A report reviewing this rental program was supposed to be submitted for review by March 31, 2009.

QUESTION 3: *What is the current status of the rental repair program? And was a report submitted to the Disaster Recovery subcommittee on this program?*

Conclusion

Having clearly delineated interim housing policy that specifically defines the roles and responsibilities of all involved is crucial to rebuilding a community after a disaster. Current policy is far from adequate. It relies heavily on vague generalities and future objectives. Action must be taken now to ensure that FEMA and the nation are prepared for the realities of the next catastrophic disaster.

Again, thank you for evaluating these issues and considering our recommendations. Please let us know if you have any additional questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

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[1] 6 U.S.C. 772

[2] National Disaster Housing Strategy (2009), 28.

[3] U.S. Senate. Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. *Far From Home: Deficiencies in Federal Disaster Housing Assistance After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and Recommendations for Improvement*. (S Rpt 111-7) Washington: Government Printing Office, (2009), 283.

[4] *Id.* at 581.

[5] The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned, White House Report (2006), 60.

[6] National Disaster Housing Strategy Annex 1 (2009), 49-50.

[7] IAA Number HSFEHQ-08-X-1760

[8] *Supra.* n6.

[9] *Supra.* n3 at 8.

[10] *Supra.* n3 at 11.

[11] National Disaster Housing Strategy Annex 5 (2009), 119.

[12] *Supra.* n3 at 274.