

January 24, 2018

The Honorable Brock Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington DC 20472

Dear Administrator Long:

On behalf of the Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition, I write to express our deepest concerns about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) failure to address the longer term housing needs of low income people displaced by recent hurricanes and wildfires. We urge FEMA to take immediate action to work with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to stand up the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP), a proven solution to this ongoing crisis, and to collect and make public data to ensure that the recovery reaches all households.

The Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition is led by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and includes more than 250 national, state, and local organizations, including many organizations working directly with disaster-impacted communities and with first-hand experience recovering after disasters. We work to ensure that federal disaster recovery efforts reach all impacted households, including those with the lowest incomes who are often the hardest-hit by disasters and have the fewest resources to recover afterwards.

One of the top priorities after a disaster is making sure that all displaced families have a safe, accessible, and affordable place to live while they get back on their feet. History has shown us that DHAP is especially effective for individuals and families with the greatest needs – including low income seniors, people with disabilities, families with children, veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and others – after devastating disasters. By providing temporary rental assistance and wrap-around case management, DHAP helps the lowest income families find permanent housing solutions, secure employment, and connect to public benefits as they rebuild their lives and get back on their feet. DHAP has been used successfully after Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike and Superstorm Sandy.

Despite the clear need, FEMA has not taken the steps necessary to stand up the DHAP program. To this end, we urge FEMA to immediately enter into an interagency agreement with HUD to allow HUD to stand up its DHAP program to serve eligible disaster survivors. It has been five months since the first hurricane made landfall. FEMA's delay in standing up the DHAP program is nothing short of unacceptable. In the past, these steps were taken as quickly as two weeks after a disaster.

The critical need for DHAP is underscored by FEMA's recent decision to abruptly terminate Temporary Shelter Assistance (TSA) for dozens of families in Connecticut displaced from Puerto Rico after the recent hurricanes, forcing them to find alternative housing or to return to their uninhabitable homes on the island with just a few hours' notice. As a result, these families now face the impossible decision to either live in unhealthy and unsafe homes or to pay far too much of their limited incomes on rent, making it harder to meet their other basic needs. Without DHAP, there will likely be even more stories of families who will not have a safe, accessible, and affordable place to live in the coming weeks as TSA deadlines, including the February 10 deadline for Florida, approach quickly.

Merely extending TSA, however, is not sufficient to address the longer term housing needs of the lowest income people, who face significant barriers to accessing TSA. TSA must be renewed every 14 days, creating great instability for those relying on it. Because it expires six months after the initial disaster declaration without further action, transitional shelter will create severe housing instability for many households. Moreover, hotels participating in FEMA's transitional shelter program often charge daily "resort" fees, require security deposits, and require that displaced households have credit cards – all of which are barriers for low income households that have already depleted any savings that they may have had and that are often unbanked or underbanked. There are numerous accounts of individuals who are unable to access FEMA's TSA program and who are facing enormous issues in finding accessible, affordable rental homes on the private market. Without a longer term solution like DHAP, these displaced, low income families have little choice but to move into uninhabitable or overcrowded homes, stay at shelters, or sleep in cars or on the streets.

At the same time, state-run disaster housing programs face significant delays and have been unable to address the full scale of the housing needs. In Texas and Florida, for example, only a handful of landlords are participating in the state's rental programs.

We also urge FEMA to collect and make public disaster recovery data at the most granular level possible to help ensure that federal resources are being spent fairly and equitably to meet the needs of low income people and communities. Access to data on unmet needs and how resources are spent is necessary to inform effective public participation in the development of state action plans and to ensure that the use of public funds is balanced among homeowners, renters, and people experiencing homelessness, as well as among housing, infrastructure, and mitigation projects targeted to the most affected areas and the lowest-income households. Making FEMA data public can also help identify gaps in services as well reforms needed for future disaster recoveries.

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with you. NLIHC staff will reach out to your office to schedule a meeting as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Diane Yentel".

Diane Yentel
President and CEO
National Low Income Housing Coalition