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LEGAL AID GROUPS DEVELOP MECHANISM FOR FEMA TO ATTEND APPLICATIONS FOR DISASTER ASSISTANCE OF PERSONS WITHOUT FORMAL LEGAL TITLE.

SAN JUAN- Thanks to the efforts of the free legal aid group Ayuda Legal Huracán María and other legal aid service providers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) agreed to reconsider applications for disaster assistance from those persons who are owners of their property but who lack a formal title or the documents to verify ownership. A document was developed for these persons to fill out and present to FEMA along with their request for an appeal. This document will substitute the notarized statement previously required by FEMA and serves as a template for persons who have acquired the property through heirship or have lived in their properties through the time required by law to become owners, among other cases.

After months of efforts and communications with FEMA in the United States, the Agency agreed to apply evenly their requirements to prove or verify ownership, finally approving the document. “What we did was explain to FEMA what Puerto Rican law states about forms of being an owner, which do not require having an official document that affirms the person is an owner and protects eligible persons who want to apply to disaster assistance. This achievement will open the doors for more than 48,000 thousand families to have access to the disaster assistance they have a right to request and were denied because they could not prove ownership. This is very important for those persons, who ten months after the hurricanes are still in vulnerable conditions and do not have a safe house because they have been unable to access repair funds” -explained Ariadna Godreau Aubert, Executive Director of Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico and Coordinator of Ayuda Legal Huracán María.

“This document does not require notarization, so we keep opening the door to access to justice. It is a simple document, that can be completed without any type of legal assistance, by the person on his or her own. We want FEMA to make consistent decisions, in accordance with federal regulations and with the purpose of assisting persons and communities affected. Soon we will be announcing an agenda of community visits to educate on the use of the document as well as a seminar -funded by the Access to Justice Foundation- that will educate FEMA personnel about Puerto Rican law and this document”- added Mariel Quiñones Mundo.

The document is not a sworn statement, so it does not have to be notarized and will only require the signature under oath of the person appealing the denial. Depending on the case, it should be accompanied of the supporting documents that will serve to backup the application or appeal such as maintenance receipts or death certificate. Completing the document does not guarantee that the application or appeal will be resolved in a satisfactory manner, as eligibility must be established.

We invite communities who want to receive workshops or orientation to contact us, or our network of collaborating entities. Ayuda Legal Huracán María is an initiative of Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico, Inc. More information about this initiative can be found at www.ayudalegalhuracanmaria.org and our social media pages.

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