

DISASTER HOUSING RECOVERY COALITION: YEAR ONE

BUILDING THE COALITION

In building the DHRC, we organized around seven key principles to ensure a just and equitable recovery for low income survivors and their communities. These principles were developed with the direct engagement of state and local organizations on the ground in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico:

1. Everyone in need receives safe, temporary housing where they can reconnect with family and community.
2. Securing help from government is accessible, understandable, and timely.
3. Displaced people have access to all the resources they need for as long as they need to safely and quickly recover housing, personal property and transportation; disaster rebuilding jobs and contracts are locally sourced, whenever possible.
4. Everyone is fairly assisted to fully and promptly recover through transparent and accountable programs and strict compliance with civil rights laws, with survivors having a say in the way assistance is provided.
5. All homeowners can quickly rebuild in safe, quality neighborhoods of their choice.
6. Renters and anyone experiencing homelessness before the disaster quickly get quality, affordable, accessible rental property in safe, quality neighborhoods of their choice.
7. All neighborhoods are free from environmental hazards, have equal quality, accessible public infrastructure and are safe and resilient.



To achieve these policy goals, the DHRC:

- Convened regular, national conference calls for the rapid exchange of information between community leaders and advocates in Washington. Every conference call featured updates from the field.
- Updated members weekly (and more often, as needed) on the actions of FEMA, HUD, and other federal agencies, as well as best practices from across the disaster zones and past disasters.
- Activated local, state, and national organizations on opportunities to educate and engage members of Congress and the administration, leveraging their first-hand experience in disaster recovery and advocating ways to help families and communities back on their feet.
- Engaged media on the continued housing needs of survivors through a robust communications strategy. The DHRC influenced 183 media stories with a total reach of approximately 647 million readers between September 11, 2017 and July 5, 2018.
- Four smaller DHRC working groups met regularly around specific challenges: Policy, Data Transparency, Puerto Rico, and Homelessness.

IMMEDIATE HOUSING NEEDS

Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP)

The DHRC created factsheets and other advocacy materials to educate Congress on the need for DHAP, including:

- [Factsheet on DHAP](#)
- [Setting the Record Straight: FEMA's Failure to Address the Long-Term Housing Needs of Survivors](#)
- [Setting the Record Straight: DHAP for Hurricane Maria Survivors](#)
- [Setting the Record Straight: Disaster Rental Assistance Programs at FEMA and HUD](#)
- A national [letter](#) signed by over 200 organizations, urging Congress to activate DHAP in any must-pass legislation.

DHRC secured support from dozens of members of Congress in support of DHAP. Below are some ways congressional members weighed in on this key resource.

Legislation

- Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) introduced the “Disaster Housing Assistance Act” ([S.2880](#)), requiring FEMA to activate DHAP for families displaced after the 2017 hurricanes. DHRC worked with Senator Nelson to fast-track the “Disaster Housing Assistance Act,” but our efforts were unsuccessful.
- Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and seven other Senators introduced the “[Housing Victims of Major Disasters Act of 2018](#)” to activate DHAP for those displaced by Hurricane Maria and after future disasters. NLIHC President and CEO Diane Yentel is quoted in a [press release](#) issued by Senator Warren.

Congressional Action

- Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Bill Cassidy (R-LA) sent a [letter](#) to FEMA urging the agency to work with HUD to provide housing to displaced families from Puerto Rico, Texas, Florida, and the Virgin Islands (October 18).
- A group of 12 senators sent a [letter](#) to FEMA and HUD urging the agencies to activate DHAP (November 15).
- Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Bill Nelson (D-FL) sent a [letter](#) to FEMA, urging the agency to coordinate with HUD to better address affordable, long-term housing solutions for Floridians and Puerto Ricans displaced by the 2017 hurricanes (January 26).
- Senator Warren—along with several of her colleagues in the Senate—sent letters to FEMA, calling on the agency to address the urgent housing needs of displaced families ([April 20](#) and [June 21](#)),
- Representative Sean Maloney (D-NY) issued a [letter](#) to FEMA, urging it to reconsider its May 15 denial of Puerto Rico Governor Rossello’s request for DHAP. Rep. Maloney’s [press release](#) quoted NLIHC President and CEO Diane Yentel (May 28).
- Senator Warren issued a [press release](#) supporting DHAP, citing the support of the DHRC, and quoting NLIHC President and CEO Diane Yentel (May 31).

- The Massachusetts congressional delegation sent a [letter](#) to FEMA, encouraging it to activate DHAP (June 13).
- Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey (D-MA) sent a [letter](#) to FEMA, urging DHAP for Hurricane Maria survivors (June 21).
- A group of U.S. senators and representatives sent a [letter](#) to FEMA Administrator Brock Long and HUD Secretary Ben Carson requesting an extension of TSA and the activation of DHAP (June 27).
- Representatives Maxine Waters (D-CA) of the Financial Services Committee, Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) of the Small Business Committee, Bennie Thompson (D-MS) of the Committee on Homeland Security, and Richard Neal (D-MA) signed onto a [letter](#) urging FEMA Administrator Brock Long to activate DHAP (June 29).

Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA)

Instead of activating DHAP, FEMA has relied on its Temporary Shelter Assistance (TSA) hotel program. DHRC played a lead role in keeping this ineffective and damaging response ever before FEMA administrators, the media, and congressional members.

- Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) sent a [letter](#) to FEMA, requested an extension of eligibility for TSA program (January 12).
- DHRC submitted a [letter](#) to FEMA and issued a press [statement](#) after FEMA abruptly reversed TSA extension for Puerto Rican families displaced to Connecticut (January 24).
- The *Orlando Sentinel* published a [commentary](#) by NLIHC President and CEO Diane Yentel, criticizing FEMA's housing recovery response and calling for longer-term housing assistance through DHAP (April 20).
- The Miami Herald and [Orlando Sentinel](#) feature DHRC members in [articles](#) on FEMA's approaching, self-imposed June 30 deadline to end TSA for nearly 2,000 displaced hurricane survivors from Puerto Rico (June 28).
- The *Orlando Sentinel* featured an [op-ed](#) by Diane Yentel, President and CEO of the NLIHC, admonishing FEMA's inadequate disaster-recovery response (June 29).
- The U.S. District Court of Appeals in Massachusetts blocked FEMA's plans to evict hurricane-displaced families from Puerto Rico in response to a lawsuit filed by Latino Justice PRLDEF (DHRC partner based in New York) with support from Faith in Action (with which DHRC was also working). The District Court [ordered](#) FEMA to extend the deadline nationwide for its TSA program, giving FEMA an opportunity to file its opposition; and the plaintiffs—all individuals who evacuated Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria—time to reply.

LONG-TERM HOUSING RECOVERY

DHRC has made it a top priority to ensure that long-term housing recovery resources like Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) grants are available to low income survivors and their communities.

Congressional Disaster Recovery Packages

For the 2017 disasters, Congress appropriated \$35.4 billion in CDBG-DR funds over two disaster supplemental bills. DHRC worked with its state and national partners to secure these resources

and ensure that states allocate CDBG-DR funds equitably.

To this end, DHRC:

- Developed top [priorities](#) for any disaster supplemental spending bill passed by Congress.
- Sent a [letter](#) outlining concerns about the possible impact of tax reform on disaster recovery resources.
- Urged key Congressional Committees in a [letter](#) to improve the disaster relief bill under discussion.
- Sent a letter to Congressional leaders signed by more than 340 national, state, and local organizations, urging the immediate passage of a robust disaster relief bill that includes basic safeguards and housing resources to help vulnerable populations recover and rebuild after the 2017 hurricanes and wildfires.
- Published a detailed [analysis](#) of the bill, which provided \$28 billion in CDBG-DR funds and other financial resources, and issued a press [release](#) commending Congress for the bill's passage.

Puerto Rico Title Issues

After a yearlong effort, DHRC partners in Puerto Rico won approval from FEMA for alternative documentation to show proof of homeownership for disaster assistance in Puerto Rico for those without legal titles to their homes, a common occurrence on the island. With assistance from DHRC members, Ayuda Legal Huracán María and other legal aid service providers in Puerto Rico drafted the form and then worked with FEMA's Office of Chief Counsel to finalize it and have it approved. The document, which more accurately reflects probate estate laws on the island where ownership is often not attached to formal titles, does not require notarization.

State CDBG-DR Action Plans

The DHRC advocated with HUD, [urging](#) the agency issue a Federal Register Notice with robust transparency and accountability requirements to help states and local communities administer disaster recovery programs. DHRC then provided a platform for collective monitoring and mobilization in response to state action plans. For each state, DHRC provided [outlines](#), [charts](#), and [analyses](#) to help prepare state and local partners to engage in the public comment process.

DHRC issued a comprehensive set of policy [recommendations](#) that advocates used with governors to ensure that CDBG-DR action plans provide a fair and equitable recovery. A separate [set of recommendations](#) specific to the Puerto Rico CDBG-DR action plan were developed highlighting the unique challenges in the territory.

Authorizing Legislation

DHRC played an active role in developing and supporting CDBG-DR-authorizing legislation and worked closely with Congresswoman Ann Wagner (R-MO) in shaping the "[Reforming Disaster Recovery Act of 2018](#)" (HR 4557) to permanently authorize the CDBG-DR program. As a result, the bill was amended to include several significant DHRC priorities, as outlined in a DHRC [letter](#) to the Chair and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Financial Services. A [hearing](#) was held in Committee on the bill, featuring DHRC members Carlos Martin from Urban Institute and Marion McFadden from Enterprise Community Partners. And, the bill was [approved](#) by the committee with broad bipartisan support.

QUALITY AND TRANSPARENT DATA

The absence of publicly available data from FEMA has proven to be one of the greatest challenges to ensuring low income households are treated equitably. DHRC engaged and mobilized partner organizations through a variety of channels to work collectively to bring housing assistance and recovery data into the light for both accountability and forward thinking in the federal response.

To this end, DHRC and/or its members:

- Released a blog [post](#) with its partners, highlighting early findings from FEMA data that found that half of the nearly 900,000 registrants applying for assistance were renters. Forty-seven percent of them lived in neighborhoods with a poverty rate of at least 20%, and 37% of these renters were likely have income less than \$25,000 (October 30).
- Published an analysis of damage assessments in [Texas](#) and [Florida](#), showing that renters were disproportionately represented among registrants, and racial and ethnic minorities and households with limited financial resources might face greater difficulty in planning for, coping with, and recovering from disaster (October 31).
- Proposed a new [method](#) for assessing unmet disaster recovery needs that more fairly factors in disproportionately impacted communities (Texas Housers, February 27).
- Filed an amicus [brief](#) on behalf of NLIHC, the Mississippi Center for Justice, St. Bernard Project, and Texas Low Income Housing Information Service (a DHRC partner) in support of a suit filed by Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (also a DHRC partner) in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on behalf of 26 disaster survivors whose homes were damaged in the storms. It argues that FEMA is violating the “due process” clause of the Administrative Procedure Act by lacking an adequate appeals process for survivors deemed ineligible for individual assistance. The brief also argues that FEMA has inconsistent standards for granting or denying claims. Both arguments stem from the lack of transparent criteria upon which denials are made and appeals are dependent (The Penn State Law Civil Rights Appellate Clinic, May 31).
- Organized a day-long disaster research workshop for a group of researchers and partners from around the country to focus on long-term disaster recovery of affordable housing. Participants included University of Florida’s Shimberg Center, New Orleans Data Center, Texas A & M, and representatives of the Policy Development and Research divisions of both HUD and FEMA (June 19).