



October 26, 2018

The Honorable Brock Long, Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20472-0001

Dear Administrator Long:

On behalf of the Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition (DHRC), I am writing to urge immediate action by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to address the severe and pressing housing needs caused by the devastation of Hurricanes Michael and Florence. We are deeply concerned that FEMA is again failing to address the immediate and longer-term housing needs of low income survivors, leaving thousands of displaced families without the stable, affordable homes they need to fully recover. Without immediate action by your agency to provide immediate shelter and to activate proven longer-term housing solutions like the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP), we fear that this dire situation will lead to families having no choice but to return to uninhabitable homes, to sleep in cars or on the streets, or to pay more than half of their income on rent, putting them at higher risk of evictions, and in worst cases, homelessness.

The Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition is led by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and includes nearly 800 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.

After the devastation caused by Hurricane Michael, Mayor Greg Brudnicki reports that the biggest obstacle facing Panama City, Florida is the displacement of more than 10,000 residents and FEMA's failure to provide adequate temporary housing. According to the mayor, there are no community assets that can be converted into housing for residents; churches, community centers, and other structures have all been damaged or destroyed and would pose an unacceptable safety risk to survivors. The Panama City Housing Authority reports that half of its 450 homes will be condemned, leaving low income seniors, people with disabilities, families with children, and other individuals struggling to find viable options for shelter.

FEMA's response to these critical and immediate housing needs has been inadequate. Local officials have not received information from FEMA about available alternatives for temporary housing; Mayor Brudnicki's staff have been told by FEMA that there are no available trailers for residents. While the mayor has called for creative housing solutions, such as using cruise ships or adapting the agency's STEP program to help avoid displacement among local families who rent their homes, he has not received any action from FEMA. The mayor's team has identified 365 vacant hotel rooms that could be used to house survivors, but they have not yet heard back from FEMA about whether the agency will reimburse the city for these costs. Moreover, the mayor has raised concerns about households in need of temporary housing who may not be eligible for FEMA's Individual Assistance program for various reasons.

More than a month after Hurricane Florence made landfall, families in the Carolinas continue to face displacement and struggle to find stable, affordable homes. Most recently, more than 1,000 people were displaced after a large apartment complex closed earlier this week in Wilmington, North Carolina. Thousands more have been unable to access FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance (TSA) hotel program due to financial barriers and have been left without the support they need.

FEMA must make the immediate and longer-term housing needs of Hurricane Michael and Florence survivors a top priority, before it repeats the agency's failures to prioritize the same for survivors of Hurricanes Maria, Irma and Harvey. After the 2017 disasters, FEMA has continued to refuse to work with the HUD to stand up DHAP, a proven solution to this ongoing crisis. By providing longer-term rental assistance and wrap-around case management services through local housing professionals, 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. As a result of FEMA's negligence, hundreds of families became homeless and thousands more continue to struggle to get back on their feet.

We urge you to take immediate action to ensure that every survivor has an affordable, stable place to live while they recover by providing trailers or other immediate temporary housing solutions in communities like Panama City and activating DHAP for other low income people impacted by Hurricanes Michael and Florence.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. Please feel free to reach out to me or NLIHC Senior Director Sarah Mickelson (smickelson@nlihc.org) at any time.

Sincerely,

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

Diane Yentel
President and CEO
National Low Income Housing Coalition