

April 23, 2021

The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20472

To Administrator Criswell,

On behalf of the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) and the NLIHC-led Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition (DHRC), I congratulate you on your historic confirmation to be the first woman to lead FEMA. The task ahead is certainly difficult, but NLIHC and our members and partners stand ready to work with you to ensure that the lowest-income and most marginalized people – including people of color, individuals experiencing homelessness, individuals living with disabilities, and others – can access critical disaster housing recovery resources, both during the ongoing pandemic and during future disasters. To this end, I would like to request a meeting with you to discuss ways FEMA can help ensure an equitable disaster recovery.

The DHRC includes more than [850 local, state, and national organizations](#), including many organizations working directly with disaster-impacted communities and with first-hand experience recovering after disasters. Together, we work to ensure that federal disaster recovery efforts reach all impacted households, including those with the lowest incomes. The DHRC has published a comprehensive set of recommendations for [Congress](#), [HUD](#), and [FEMA](#) that would help ensure federal resources meet the housing needs of the lowest-income people and communities.

During the pandemic, FEMA successfully expanded its Public Assistance (PA) program to help move people experiencing homelessness into non-congregate hotels and motels to safely self-isolate and quarantine. This strategy has not only placed those at highest risk in a safe location, but it also allowed shelters to lower their populations, ensuring a safer stay for those remaining. Moreover, President Biden's January executive order directing FEMA to provide PA reimbursements at 100% of eligible costs and to allow funding to be provided in advance will save lives.

The DHRC has been working with state and local partners to determine best practices and lessons learned as they implement non-congregate sheltering. From these experiences, we have identified [reforms](#) needed to help prevent outbreaks of coronavirus or a future pandemic disease among people experiencing homelessness and other [individuals living in congregate settings](#). For example, we urge FEMA to employ broad-based categories of eligibility, with the aim that every at-risk person receives the assistance to which they are entitled, and to make available to the public and partners on the ground critical information, such as expiration dates and application processes. FEMA should activate the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) to ensure that people experiencing homelessness currently staying in hotels and motels can transition to permanent housing, rather than being pushed back into homelessness when the PA program

ends. These and other recommendations are included in [NLIHC's transition memo](#) to the Biden administration.

[Reforms](#) are also needed to ensure greater equity after other natural disasters. When disasters occur, the lowest-income and most marginalized survivors are often hardest hit. They have the fewest resources and face the longest, steepest path to recovery. Despite the clear need, federal efforts frequently leave these survivors without the assistance needed to recover and leave their communities less resilient to future disasters. The result is a disaster housing recovery framework that exacerbates and [reinforces racial, income, and accessibility inequities](#) at each stage of response and recovery. Enclosed is a memorandum outlining actions FEMA can take administratively to reform programs to ensure that the lowest-income and most marginalized people receive the assistance they need to fully and equitably recover.

We would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you to discuss opportunities to ensure greater equity in disaster housing recovery during the pandemic and other disasters. Please feel free to reach out to me directly at dyentel@nlihc.org or to NLIHC's Vice President of Policy Sarah Saadian at ssaadian@nlihc.org.

Sincerely,

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

Diane Yentel
President and CEO
National Low Income Housing Coalition