



**NATIONAL LOW INCOME
HOUSING COALITION**

March 31, 2022

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

Administrator Criswell:

On behalf of the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) and the NLIHC-led Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition (DHRC), I write to urge you to reverse the recent decision by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to require the lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors impacted by Hurricane Laura to begin paying rent while utilizing the agency's direct manufactured housing program. Nearly 1,700 disaster survivor households – predominately households with the lowest incomes, households of color, seniors, and people with disabilities – remain in FEMA's direct housing program and face tremendous challenges in transitioning to permanent, affordable housing. Your decision to have FEMA charge these survivors rent places them at higher risk of displacement, eviction, and in worst cases, homelessness. To help ensure housing stability, I urge you to grant the [request](#) of Senators Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and John Kennedy (R-LA) and Representative Clay Higgins (R-LA) to waive monthly rent payments through October 31, 2022 for these survivors, and to waive rent payments for the thousands of Hurricane Delta and Hurricane Ida survivor households utilizing the program when their housing subsidies end later this year.

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 includes multiple organizations based in Louisiana working with disaster survivors.

One of the top priorities after a disaster must be ensuring all displaced survivors have a safe, accessible, and affordable place to live while they recover. Far too many Hurricane Laura survivors, however, are struggling to access safe, accessible homes. The cumulative effects of multiple disasters in Southwest Louisiana during 2020 and 2021, including Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida, the 2021 spring floods, 2021 winter freeze, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have made it nearly impossible for households with the lowest incomes to recover. Although long-term recovery funding has been approved by HUD, those funds have not yet reached disaster survivors, nor will it in the immediate future. Without continued housing assistance, many of the lowest-income and most marginalized survivors will have no choice but to return to uninhabitable homes, sleep in cars or at shelters, double- or triple-up with other low-income families, or pay more than half of their limited incomes on rent, putting them at increased risk of housing instability and, in worst cases, homelessness.

FEMA is not required by law to collect rental payments from survivors on direct housing program units, and regulations provide the agency with considerable flexibility to ensure that survivors can afford any rental payments that the agency may choose to impose. Agency guidelines state that after the 18-month disaster declaration ends, “FEMA may begin to charge up to the fair market rent rate for each temporary housing unit provided. We will base the rent charged on the number of bedrooms occupied and needed by the household. When establishing the amount of rent, FEMA will take into account the financial ability of the household.”¹

Despite this flexibility, FEMA announced in letters sent to residents that the agency would be terminating housing assistance for survivors and that residents would be expected to pay the full Fair Market Rent for these units. While residents were informed of their ability to seek an appeal to adjust the amount of rent they would be charged, residents must still pay rent *during the appeal process* or otherwise pay a lump sum once they receive a final determination.

Your decision to have FEMA charge survivors rent without sufficient alternative supports in place will only make it harder for the lowest-income and most marginalized survivors to recover and runs counter to FEMA’s recent public commitment to uphold equity throughout its programs.² In testimony to the House Homeland Security Committee in 2021, you said that “diversity, equity, and inclusion are not optional and must be core components of how we conduct ourselves and execute our mission. They are not empty buzzwords.”³ To advance greater equity, you must re-evaluate and reverse your decision to burden and further displace low-income disaster survivors.

Sincerely,



Diane Yentel
President and CEO
National Low Income Housing Coalition

cc:

Susan E. Rice, Director, Domestic Policy Council
Erika Poethig, Special Assistant to the President for Housing and Urban Policy, Domestic Policy Council
Melissa Forbes, Acting Assistant Administrator, Office of Recovery, FEMA
Tony Robinson, Region 6 Administrator, FEMA

¹ CFR 44, 206.117(b)(1)(ii)(F) (emphasis added)

² FEMA, [2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan](#), Objective 1: Instill Equity as a Foundation of Emergency Management (2022); see also FEMA, “[FEMA Defines Equity in its Mission of Making Programs More Accessible](#)”, Press Release (September 9, 2021); Department of Homeland Security, “[DHS Announces Changes to Individual Assistance Policies to Advance Equity for Disaster Survivors](#)”, Press Release (September 2, 2021).

³ United State House of Representatives, [Statement of Deanne Criswell Before the Committee on Homeland Security](#) (June 29, 2021).