

United States Senate

May 23, 2018

The Honorable William B. Long
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, South West
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Long,

With the start of hurricane season less than a month away, I applaud your recent efforts to improve the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) disaster response and ensure that communities across the United States are better prepared for the next disaster. As you well know, there is still work to be done. I encourage you to review and improve FEMA's application process and communication channels with disaster survivors, with particular attention to denial letters. Such a review is consistent with FEMA's strategic goal to "Reduce the Complexity of FEMA" as part of its 2018-2022 Strategic Plan.

FEMA determination letters, commonly referred to as denial letters, were a cause of concern to many of my constituents affected by Hurricane Harvey. These letters can have the effect of prematurely denying applicants disaster aid and deterring survivors from continuing the disaster assistance process. Additionally, the complex language in the letters does not effectively explain the full significance of ineligibility, causing uncertainty among survivors.

I recognize there are numerous reasons why a person is determined ineligible for assistance and that FEMA provides an appeals process for applicants. It is, however, important to ensure that each applicant has a clear understanding of the application process so they can successfully navigate it. I encourage you to consider the following changes to make the process more efficient:

- Define Ineligibility: As stated in your November 18, 2011, press release titled FEMA Denial Letters: Not Always the Final Word, "receiving a 'denial' letter from FEMA does not necessarily mean an applicant is not eligible for disaster aid, even when the letter states 'ineligible' or 'incomplete.' It can be an indication that further information is needed." This important explanation is not communicated in the current letters. As a result, applicants interpret the word ineligible as being denied assistance as opposed to their application missing information. For this reason, FEMA should explain in its letters that ineligibility means the application is incomplete and additional information is required in order for the applicant to qualify for disaster assistance.

- Take a Proactive Approach: In cases where an applicant is missing information, FEMA should notify all applicants through written communication and provide them the opportunity to correct any deficiencies in their application prior to determining eligibility. By taking this proactive approach, applicants are encouraged to continue the process and FEMA achieves its fundamental mission of helping people.
- Provide Written Guidance: While Disaster Recovery Centers and the FEMA Helpline provide one-on-one guidance to survivors during the application process, numerous applicants submit the application for disaster assistance without the benefit of speaking with a FEMA representative. FEMA should provide clear written guidance in the application that explains in detail FEMA's eligibility standards and describes the documentation necessary to support the application.

As you indicated in the Strategic Plan, we must all work together to bring meaningful improvements to disaster recovery in order to better help survivors. Our office stands ready to work with you in achieving this important endeavor.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of the people of Texas and for your prompt consideration to our request.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
United States Senator