

February 6, 2019

Chair Ron Johnson
Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

Chair Peter A. DeFazio
House Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure

Ranking Member Gary C. Peters
Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

Ranking Member Sam Graves
House Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure

Dear Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, Chair DeFazio, and Ranking Member Graves,

On behalf of the Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition, I write to express serious concerns about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) repeated failure to address the housing needs of low-income disaster survivors. Under the Trump Administration, FEMA has responded to five major hurricanes, deadly wildfires, and many other emergencies. Each time, FEMA has failed to meet the housing needs of the lowest-income survivors, including people with disabilities, seniors, families with children, and those experiencing homelessness prior to a disaster. Without proper housing assistance, these households have no choice but to return to uninhabitable homes, sleep in cars or tents, double or triple up with other low-income families, or pay more than half of their income on rent, putting them at increased risk of evictions and, in the worst cases, homelessness. We urge you, as leaders of the Senate Homeland Security Committee and House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, to hold oversight hearings to examine the agency's repeated failure to address the housing needs of low-income disaster survivors and to work with advocates and other stakeholders on much-needed reforms.

The Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition, led by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, includes over 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.

Most recently, Hurricane Michael destroyed or damaged an estimated 40,000 homes in Florida (about a quarter of the housing stock), the Camp Fire damaged or destroyed over 14,000 homes in California,¹ and Hurricane Florence damaged as many as 95,000 homes in the Carolinas.² FEMA has proven itself incapable of providing housing for the thousands of households displaced by these and other disasters. FEMA's slow pace in providing housing assistance is unacceptable and inexplicable. In many ways, FEMA is repeating the same mistakes it made after Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

¹ CAL Fire, "Camp Fire Incident Update," November 25, 2018.

http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/admin8327985/cdf/images/incidentfile2277_4326.pdf

² Martha Quillin, "For Florence victims, there's no place like home – even if the repairs are temporary," *Charlotte Observer*, November 14, 2018. <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/article221586040.html>

It has been more than four months since Hurricane Florence slammed the Carolinas, nearly four months after Hurricane Michael ravaged the Florida Panhandle, and more than two months after the devastating Camp Fire in Butte County, CA, yet far too many low-income survivors are still struggling to meet their most basic need: a safe, affordable place to call home. In Florida, advocates reported that FEMA issued tents for about 500 families to live in while survivors continue to wait for housing assistance. As the last shelter closed in Chico, CA, on January 31, almost 100 people were left struggling to find safe places to sleep, and many of the nearly 500 additional survivors living in cars or trailers in a parking lot were forced to leave if their vehicles did not meet certain standards or they were unable to pay the \$40 daily fee.³ In the Carolinas, families displaced from their communities, jobs, and social supports likewise continue to struggle to find affordable places to live while they get back on their feet.

While some survivors of Hurricanes Michael and Florence and the California wildfires are staying in FEMA-funded motels through the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program, many low-income families continue to face barriers to use the program. Participating hotels continue to ask survivors to pay daily “resort” fees or require security deposits or credit cards, all of which are prohibitive for low-income families. FEMA continues to extend the deadlines for TSA at the last minute, creating panic and uncertainty for survivors living in TSA hotels. There are still too few participating hotels, forcing survivors to leave their communities without knowing when they will return and putting a strain on local economies. Many survivors do not want to leave their communities where they may have steady employment, support networks, and familial obligations.

Despite the clear need for longer-term housing assistance, FEMA continues to refuse to activate the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP), which provides rental assistance and case management to survivors. DHAP was successfully used after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and would be a transformative resource for survivors. DHAP would help reduce the number of people living unhoused and help survivors with the longer-term housing necessary to rebuild their lives.

This is not the first time that FEMA has failed to address the housing needs of low-income survivors. FEMA’s inaction after Hurricane Michael and the California wildfires is a repeat of their inaction following Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma and the California wildfires of 2017, with long-term negative impacts on survivors and their communities. More than a year after Hurricane Harvey, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the Houston area has increased for the first time in seven years. About 18% of the people living unsheltered cited the hurricane as their trigger into homelessness.⁴ Homelessness rates also increased by double

³ Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks, “Camp Fire victims have been through ‘hell.’ As last shelter closes, where will they go?,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 30, 2019. <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/homeless/article225194350.html>

⁴ Khambrel Marshall, “Houston homeless rate increases,” *Click2Houston*, November 18, 2019. <https://www.click2houston.com/newsmakers/newsmakers-for-nov-18-20000-expected-for-thanksgiving-super-feast>

digits from 2017 to 2018 in both Connecticut⁵ and Massachusetts⁶, where large numbers of Puerto Ricans fled after Hurricane Maria. Survivors in Puerto Rico are still working to prove ownership of their homes to FEMA so they can obtain housing assistance, a problem that also occurred in Louisiana, Texas, and now Florida. Six months after the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Sonoma County, CA, average rent prices increased by 30% and the rental vacancy rate – which was at 2% before the fire – dropped to zero.⁷ Low-income residents are left with few housing options, and the county has experienced a 6% increase in the number of people living unhoused with another 10,000 living in unstable conditions.⁸

The Senate Homeland Security and House Transportation and Infrastructure Committees must hold FEMA accountable for these failures. We urge you to hold oversight hearings to examine the agency's repeated neglect of low-income survivors' housing needs following the recent disasters. We also urge you to work with survivors, advocates, and stakeholders to reform federal disaster recovery efforts to ensure a complete and equitable recovery for all survivors for these and future disasters.

Sincerely,



Diane Yentel
President and CEO
National Low Income Housing Coalition

⁵ Patrick Skahill, "Hurricane Maria Drives Up Connecticut's Homelessness Numbers," *New England Public Radio*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.nepr.net/post/hurricane-maria-drives-connecticuts-homelessness-numbers#stream/0>

⁶ Cynthia Fernandez, "Number of homeless people in Mass. is up 14 percent," *Boston Globe*, December 18, 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/12/17/number-homeless-rises-mass/OAGUA8qjiWmgoaMPsvPQzN/story.html>

⁷ Lizzie Johnson and Kevin Fagan, "Signs of life amid scars and loss," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 5, 2018. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/north-bay-wildfires-rebuilding-12804162.php>

⁸ Sonja Hutson, "Sonoma County Homeless Population Up Due to North Bay Fires," *KQED*, July 7, 2018. <https://www.kqed.org/news/11679471/sonoma-county-homeless-population-up-due-to-north-bay-fires>