

**THE HONORABLE MIKE ROSS
CONGRESSMAN FROM ARKANSAS' 4TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

ON

**POST KATRINA TEMPORARY HOUSING: DILEMMAS & SOLUTIONS
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MARCH 20, 2007

- Thank you Chairwoman Norton and members of the committee for holding today's hearing on post Katrina temporary housing problems. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues before the subcommittee today and I am eager to work together to find solutions to the temporary housing problem that currently exists.
- Let me begin by explaining my recent experience with a temporary housing crisis in my district due to severe weather and tornadoes that recently struck Arkansas. On February 24, 2007, severe storms and tornados ripped through the town of Dumas and Desha County, Arkansas. This small Delta community has a population of about 5,000 people and the median household income is \$26,628. When the tornado hit, it completely destroyed 37 homes and 25 businesses, injured over 30 people, and left this community without power for five days and 800 people without jobs indefinitely. In total, it was estimated that up to 150 homes were deemed uninhabitable. This kind of massive damage to a poor delta community is incredible and extremely difficult to recover from. Yet, FEMA spokesman John Philbin stated that, "The damages or need for federal assistance is not readily apparent."
- On February 27th – 3 days after the storms hit -- the Governor of Arkansas requested an emergency declaration from FEMA. Later that day, I led a conference call with FEMA Director Paulison and expressed my support for the Governor's request as well as requested that FEMA transfer some of the 8,420 new, fully furnished and never used manufactured homes located three hours away at a FEMA staging facility in Hope, Arkansas to the families in need. These homes were originally purchased for Hurricane Katrina victims, but never made it to them either. Instead, they have been sitting idly by at a FEMA staging facility in Hope, Arkansas since 2005.
- **Finally**, twelve days after the tornados destroyed parts of my district and nine days after the Governor's request, we finally received a response from FEMA. FEMA said no. They denied the state's request for an emergency declaration and as a result, the state, county, and city are now responsible for 100 percent of the storm cleanup expenses, and were not allowed to receive **even one** of the new, never used mobile homes FEMA has stored in Hope.
- But after 13 days of waiting, working, and prodding to the point of our story becoming national news, FEMA finally offered to give the state of Arkansas 30 used and/or refurbished mobile homes and travel trailers from the staging facility in Hope, but only if the state would pay to transport

them and set them up for victims who remained homeless for 2 weeks. The people of Dumas were grateful to receive them.

- In fact, I'd like to share part of an email I recently received:
Dear Congressman Ross: I am a tornado survivor in Dumas. While my husband and I have the means to take care of our own housing, I am fully aware that there are some who cannot. I am a school teacher to many of the Hispanic families who received trailers this weekend. You have no idea how much this has made an impact on these students. They came into school this morning with bright smiles on their faces, saying, "I got a new house!"
- This email shows why we do what we do in Washington to make a difference in the lives of those we represent and it confirms how important our role is in this debate. But I am frustrated with the massive bureaucracy involved in simply helping people in an emergency situation. It is astounding to me that for 13 days hard working families in my district had no where to live and yet, 160 miles away, 8,420 new, fully furnished never used mobile homes sat untouched.
- Last year, I introduced two bills to give FEMA the authority to provide relief to the victims of Hurricane Katrina and Rita and so many others in need of temporary housing caused by natural disasters. In March of last year, I introduced H. R. 4874, which would allow FEMA to distribute some of these manufactured homes to victims that are located in flood plains and in September, I introduced H.R. 6128, which would provide for the distribution of the excess manufactured housing units located at the Hope Airport to people who are in need of affordable housing.
- However, the Republican leadership would not give us one hearing or vote on these bills. Now, I want to use this hearing as an opportunity to find a way to help the people who are still suffering and improve this process for the next town that is forced to deal with a natural disaster that might not be recommended by FEMA for a Presidential "federal disaster declaration." Ultimately, with the help of Chairwoman Norton, Chairman Oberstar, and Chairman Thompson of the Homeland Security Committee, I hope to enact legislation to empower FEMA or some other federal agency to distribute these surplus homes in a timely manner to the people who so desperately need them in the direct aftermath of a natural disaster, whether declared a federal disaster or not.
- As my constituents drive down U.S. Highway 278 from Hope to Nashville, they still see 8,420 new mobile homes sitting there untouched and never used when storm victims remain homeless. To them, these homes are a symbol of why our citizens have lost faith in FEMA and feel that our government is failing them. I want to allow, once and for all, these 8,420 mobile homes to be used for communities in need like Dumas when a natural disaster hits them.
- I believe that we owe it to the people of Desha County, the victims of Hurricane Katrina, and so many other communities who are devastated by natural disasters to change the system and I am optimistic that this hearing is a step in the right direction.