

STATEMENT OF
CHAIR ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT

“STILL POST-KATRINA: HOW FEMA DECIDES WHEN HOUSING RESPONSIBILITIES
END”

MAY 22, 2009

Today’s hearing will address how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) will resolve still outstanding issues the federal government faces in providing housing to families whose homes were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, and proved to be the costliest natural disaster in American history. The storm had a massive physical impact on the land, affecting 90,000 square miles, an area the size of Great Britain. Under the authority granted to the President in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), the President declared a Major Disaster in the states of Louisiana and Mississippi on the date the storm made landfall.

Approximately 143,000 families were housed in FEMA-provided travel trailers and mobile homes as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Since this peak, most families were transitioned to more permanent housing. As of May 14, 2009, approximately 4,052 temporary housing units continue to be in use in Louisiana. FEMA has also provided \$7.8 billion in financial assistance to about 2.4 million households through FEMA's Individuals and Households Program. FEMA’s housing program formally ended on May 1, 2009.

The housing program for Hurricane Katrina was unusually long and involved as far more individuals needed housing assistance because of the unusually catastrophic nature of the disaster. To address ongoing housing needs of individuals who could not return to their homes in the Gulf Coast, FEMA used its authority under Section 408 of the Stafford Act and the Disaster Relief Fund, and delegated authority to HUD to implement the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP). DHAP is a pilot program to provide temporary long-term housing and related services for families that continued to need housing as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Unlike FEMA's rental assistance program, which provides payments directly to residents who pay landlords, DHAP, working through public housing agencies, provides rental payments directly to landlords. The DHAP program began on December 1, 2007, and served 36,816 families.

The program was scheduled to end on March 1, 2009. However, Congress appropriated \$85 million to transition program families in DHAP, extending the last eligible rental payments to August 2009. Initially, 24,343 families were assisted through this transitional program. HUD estimates that approximately 18,000 families remain in the program as of May 2009.

The situation we now face was both predictable and predicted. It has been clear from the recent FEMA hearings that those left in disaster housing would be the most vulnerable members of society, who may have had prior difficulties that have been exacerbated by the disaster. While these programs have formally ended, we still have families without a long term housing solution.

In order to facilitate an orderly transition, I wrote to the then Administrator of FEMA last July, requesting that the March 1, 2009 deadline be extended and announced immediately. While FEMA did extend the program three times, in each instance the extensions were announced at the last minute, causing unnecessary stress and hardship. My fear last summer was that this would be repeated as the March 1, 2009 deadline created by the Bush Administration and that this date would essentially push this program to the new Administration to scramble to address this issue. This is exactly what happened. The Obama Administration was forced to announce the March 2009 extension. Even with this deadline it appears that many of the most vulnerable citizens still in disaster housing have not had enough time find permanent solutions to their housing needs.

The testimony we will receive today paints a conflicting picture. The testimony of our Federal witnesses and our State witness describes a much improved situation on the ground in the Gulf from what we have seen in the past. However, other testimony and recent disturbing media reports indicate that there are families without a long term housing solution facing eviction from disaster housing. In today's hearing we hope to ascertain whether these are isolated cases that symptomatic of broader issues still outstanding after this disaster. The subcommittee does not want to be misunderstood, FEMA should not be expected to provide housing assistance indefinitely, and by statute, the agency cannot do so. It is also unacceptable to turn people out of their disaster housing with no where to go. Ultimately, it also is required that residents accept the available housing, even if they prefer the temporary housing or other housing.

FEMA and HUD have developed new and innovative housing programs to address the unprecedented disaster housing need. However, these programs did provide housing solutions for the vast majority of families left without housing by Hurricane Katrina.

The subcommittee looks forward to hearing the testimony of today's witnesses and addressing once and for all how we can resolve the ongoing housing needs of those families who are still experiencing the consequences of this devastating disaster.