STATEMENT O F
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLCI BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
"STILL POST-KATRINA: HOW FEMA DECIDES WHEN HOUSING RESPONSIBILITIES END"
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Today, the Subcommittee will receive an update on the housing programs implemented by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide assistance to families in the aftermath of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. It is unfortunate that more than three and a half years after the storm, we still have not addressed the housing needs of all of the families who survived this storm.

FEMA's housing programs, authorized by section 408 of the Robert T. Stafford Act Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, normally provide the necessary assistance families need after a disaster. However, Katrina was by no means a "normal disaster". Rather, Katrina was the largest disaster in our Nation's history. Previously when our Nation faced large or unusual disasters, FEMA was quick to adapt and provide solutions to unique problems that would arise, often working with Congress on those solutions.

After Hurricane Katrina, things were very different. FEMA was an agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and not an independent agency that reported directly to the President and Congress. As I have said time and time again, though it bears repeating, FEMA's performance as an agency has suffered since its inclusion in the Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

Even long after the response to Hurricane Katrina, the agency's placement in DHS had a detrimental effect on the residents of the Gulf Coast. There were delays in making critical decision in the recovery from Katrina. This meant that delivery of critical assistance to citizens was delayed. Citizens were put through unnecessary stress on top of what the hurricane already brought, while they waited for DHS to approve FEMA recommendations on initiating or extending housing programs.

While it is reasonable to eventually wind down the disaster housing program, it is unconscionable for the program to be wound down on short notice or without a plan in place to address the needs of those who are most vulnerable. The situation we find ourselves in today was foreseeable and foreseen.

Last summer Chair Norton wrote to the then-Administrator of FEMA, seeking an extension of the Katrina Housing program beyond March 1, 2009. She also requested that the extension be announced immediately. As predicted, this decision was deferred to the new Administration, without sufficient time to announce an extension of the program and to provide adequate notice to the effected residents. The failure to follow through on Chairwoman Norton's request in a prompt manner has once again put the residents of this region, who have already been through so much, through further unneeded stress and hardship

Another example of the difficulties in the recovery from Katrina is the delays in Louisiana's Road Home Program. This program was delayed by an ill-conceived proposal by the Bush Administration to transfer $1.2 billion in critical Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds to this program. This transfer was opposed by this Committee and ultimately thwarted but not without causing unnecessary delays and hardship. As a result, this program is still not nearly as far along as it should be.

Fortunately not all the news is bad news. As we will here from today's witnesses, the recovery from this storm is moving forward, even if belatedly. Hundreds of thousands of families have received assistance from the Federal

Government and moved on with their lives. Federal and state agencies are finally working together to solve problems constructively. It is unfortunate that it took so long for us to get to this point.

I welcome our witnesses and am pleased that we examine this important issue today.