

## HUD In Storm Recovery Chaos

Without the Federal Emergency Management Agency as the country's principal backstop in recovery efforts for hurricane-ravaged southeast Texas, Louisiana and the Southeast United States, HUD would be unable to cope with the difficulties.

Lacking operational leadership and with vacancies at the helms of principal divisions including the Office of Public & Indian Housing's top spot, HUD is largely going through the motions issuing press releases about what the department intends to do (*see related story this issue*).

So far, all HUD has been able to solidly accomplish is issuing waivers to communities with unspent Community Development Block Grant funding to divert the money to storm recovery.

Public housing authorities in the affected areas are at a loss trying to cope with the mess. PHAs have been left without reserve funds in recent years though a series of funding cuts and raids on rainy day funds to help bail out less solvent PHAs.

Consequently, PHAs have had to cope with barely enough money to provide basic maintenance and services. That leaves nothing at the moment to help patch up the thousands of public housing units destroyed, damaged by winds, or inundated by flooding.

The extra CDBG funding authorized by Congress Sept. 8 provides \$7.4 billion for CDGB-Disaster Recovery but that money will only cover a small portion of housing and infrastructure in all the states ravaged by hurricanes Harvey and Irma, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

If hurricanes Katrina, Ike, and Sandy are any indication of the pace of storm disaster recovery coordinated by the federal government, the effort will take years. For example, Galveston still hasn't been able to replace half of its public housing units 11 years after Hurricane Ike's devastation.

And federal, state and local officials continue to wrangle over millions of misspent federal aid dollars and rampant fraud surrounding the recover from Hurricane Sandy in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut in 2012.

While preliminary federal assistance for Hurricane Irma victims is still be tallied, FEMA has received 220,686 applications for individual assistance from Hurricane Harvey victims as of Sept. 12. Total individual and household program dollars approved for Harvey victims total \$302 million. Of that, \$179 million is devoted to housing recovery.

The Houston Housing Authority alone serves 60,000 residents with more than 17,000 living in Section 8 rental housing and 5,500 tenants in public housing. Without an infusion of extra funding targeting specifically for public and assisted housing, the HHA will be at a loss to provide even the minimum of assistance. The same dilemma applies to all PHAs in the hurricane zones.

The overall public and assisted housing dilemma in Harvey-affected regions as outlined by HUD is massive and the results from Hurricane Irma when tallied will add thousands more. In the Harvey zone alone, there are:

- Forty-two PHAs with 773 properties containing 199,494 public-housing units.
- There are 454 multi-apartment properties containing 50,818 units of which 20,971 units are assisted with Section 8 subsidies.

HUD is only able at this point to coordinate its activities with FEMA. Much of the HUD workforce normally dedicated to the department housing programs had been diverted to assist in the Obama administration's program to transform the department into a rental-housing, fair-housing hub with public housing managed and maintained by private contractors.

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