

Testimony of William J. Croft
The Shaw Group, Inc.
before the
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery
Tuesday, April 24, 2007, 9:30 a.m.

INTRODUCTION

Madam Chairman and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for your gracious invitation allowing me to outline my involvement and my views pertaining to the housing programs in Louisiana following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Having served as the Assistant Director of the Louisiana Office of Emergency Preparedness from 1991 through 1997, as well as a FEMA Disaster Assistance Employee in Florida following the 2004 Hurricane Season, I have experience dealing with a number of federal disaster programs including housing.

I joined Governor Blanco's office shortly after Hurricane Katrina made landfall to assist with the Temporary Housing Program and served as the Director of the Governor's Hurricane Housing Task Force from September 2005 to June 2006.

THE TASK FORCE

The Governor's Hurricane Housing Task Force was formed to facilitate the delivery and management of shelter and transitional housing programs necessary to support the displaced disaster victims of Hurricane Katrina, and later Rita, in Louisiana. The Task Force operated under the direction of the Governor's Policy and Planning Director. The Task Force was comprised of representatives of various state agencies as well as individuals with expertise in disaster shelter and temporary housing operations and disaster recovery. Through an alignment with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Housing Area Command (HAC), the Task Force closely coordinated with state and local government officials, represented the state and local governments in the execution of the sheltering and transitional housing programs and established, and monitored, housing strategies, goals, objectives and progress. Even though FEMA leadership agreed with the justification for the Task Force it was not a recognized FEMA program, therefore the State did not qualify for financial assistance for the costs incurred to execute the housing program. Returning National Guard soldiers from the Iraqi War who were still on active duty provided the bulk of the staff necessary to perform the mission of the Task Force. The Task Force continues to function today.

FOCUS

There were a number of challenges but the priority was to provide temporary housing for those disaster victims who had no housing solution and for those who were living in shelters throughout the nation. The primary goal was to provide temporary housing in or as close as we could to the evacuated family's pre storm neighborhood. For the most part, this was an impossible task due to the magnitude of the devastation and the duration of effects of the storm on the infrastructure. The concept was to bring the disaster area back to life in a coordinated effort. Housing of the general population was not the only focus. We had to restart business and industry, government, health care, education as well as public safety.

SITE DEFINITIONS

One of the initial recommendations was to clearly define the different types of travel trailer and mobile home sites. The Task Force devised a process flow chart which outlined the procedures FEMA's contractors should follow for each site in order to insure the local and state governments were include in the decision making process as to size and site selection. We established the sites to be Private Sites, Commercial Sites, Group Sites which included Emergency Group Sites and Exclusive Use Sites, and Industry Sites.

Private Sites are defined as the placement of a travel trailer on the property of a home owner or renter whose dwelling is uninhabitable which allows the family to expedite repairs and rebuilding.

A "Commercial Site" is an existing RV or Mobile Home park with available pads that FEMA leases. This was an expedient way to move units, primarily mobile homes with minimal site preparation.

A "Group Site" is developed to temporarily house eligible FEMA registrants when there is a lack of feasible private sites and commercial sites. Group sites generally consist of 50 to 200 travel trailers or mobile homes in a pre-planned location where the surrounding infrastructure can support such a development. There are three types of group sites: general population sites, emergency group sites (EGS), and exclusive use sites. Emergency Group Sites have above-ground utilities and are typically constructed on top of a hard surface such as a parking lot. Exclusive use sites are constructed to house qualifying applicants employed or belonging to a specific organization or agency that provides necessary or essential services to the disaster area.

An Industry site was designed to provide travel trailers to house displaced workers who were essential to the operation of the business or industry. The State Department of

Economic Development identified critical industrial operations such as petro-chemical plants, distribution centers and ports which FEMA provided trailers for. The industry was required to install the units and house disaster victims only. This restriction slowed the restart process by not allowing more flexibility for industry to house other critical workers. I applaud FEMA's "outside of the box" approach to the industry program but the program should be better designed for future disasters.

SITE SELECTION

Realizing the need for a large number of temporary housing units outside of the disaster area, we began working with FEMA to identify sites throughout Louisiana and working with all of our host states for help. One of the major challenges in providing housing outside of the disaster area was the impact on the community where the temporary housing was to be located. Prior to Katrina, major cities and rural communities were struggling to meet the infrastructure demands of their existing residents. It was not prudent to now overburden a community of 1,000 families with another 200 or 300 families for which they were unprepared. Louisiana proposed that impact fees be provided by FEMA to assist local communities with the capacity to help, as is the usual case when a developer proposes new development in a community. This was considered, but never approved.

WRAP AROUND SERVICES

Another important topic to consider is support of the residents of shelters and temporary housing. We continually focused on the need for wrap around services at each location where our citizens were relocated. To merely place hundreds of families in a group site and consider the mission accomplished is wrong and shortsighted. We must take care of people who are displaced from their normal services. In many cases hosting local governments provided services from existing strained resources. The FEMA program, through Stafford Act changes or through policy changes should address this inadequate approach.

THE FUTURE

It is my opinion that we have an opportunity to create a more flexible, efficient and cost-effective federal disaster housing program by making a paradigm shift in the definition and execution of the mission. We should depart from the current concepts and move to a more definable and logical approach. The future program should be structured to provide EMERGENCY SHELTERS which will provide immediate needs during the emergency phase and for 30-60 days following a disaster. The EXTENDED SHELTERS phase should include large congregate care facilities which can support sustained operations as well as travel trailers and hotel/motel rooms. The TRANSITIONAL HOUSING program would include mobile homes, apartments,

prefabricated housing, USDA facilities, HUD controlled assets and other types of housing which would support a much longer term, even permanent housing. The final and ultimate program is PERMANENT HOUSING. The federal government role in all of this is paramount to the success of providing direct housing to disaster victims.

CLOSING

Thank you for your time and attention to this important topic.

I will now answer any questions that you may have.