

**United States Senate
Subcommittee on National Disaster**

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Testimony Related to the FEMA
Temporary Housing Program
In the Aftermath of the 2004 Hurricane Season in Florida

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On behalf of Charlotte County, we would like express our gratitude to the Committee for the invitation to speak to you today. It is indeed a high honor and privilege to share our experiences and offer our input. We are hopeful that through this process we can help improve this vital emergency response system.

During the Hurricane season of 2004 Charlotte County, Florida experienced four named storms/hurricanes crisscrossing the County over a six week period. The devastation was overwhelming with the county still recovering in many areas of this small coastal community. With a population of just over 174,000, the human loss as well as the economic loss was in many cases not able to be quantified even though our loss of life was minimal. The Federal Emergency Management Agency immediately arrived in Charlotte County and was strongly involved in direct recovery in the urgent aftermath of these natural disasters. This included the construction, assembly and mobilization of a temporary housing program that was essential to our recovery progress.

Charlotte County started with 2,252 family units in FEMA temporary housing. This equates to roughly 9,000 individuals. Of these, 551 mobile/manufactured homes were installed on County owned land leased to and controlled by FEMA near our rural county airport. This facility received most of the notoriety over the months of its existence. There were 75 mobile/manufactured homes at two commercial mobile home parks in the county, 1,042 travel trailers on private sites (during reconstruction of damaged property) and 584 travel trailers in commercial travel trailer parks.

The existence of these temporary housing units was absolutely critical to the start up of the regional recovery process. Thousands of individuals would have been homeless without the availability of these housing units. There would have been a much higher level of risk factors for the community as it relates to disease, injury and life threatening situations, due to challenges and handicaps.

As with any program of this size and importance, a number of significant issues related to the operation of this program became evident. There was a lack of significant control or criteria for

continued occupation of sponsored housing. Those requirements in place were loose and prevented the vacating of units in a timely manner. There was limited local input into the decision process for the renewal of housing placements. We experienced little interaction between FEMA housing staff and local housing agencies/staff to expedite placements. The rental inventory was received from real estate lists on line or listings in the newspaper. Most were outdated before they were available to the public. There was a conscious decision, by FEMA, to prevent direct access to residents by social service agencies to help with placements due to confidentiality policies. When this access was allowed in July of 2006 it resulted in the placement of over 450 families within 60 days.

In May of 2006 a decision was made by FEMA to charge rent to those remaining occupants of temporary housing. Collection of rent was not enforced, so for the most part – no rent was paid. There was no incentive nor was there any aggressive action to make the trailers a disadvantage and advance the recovery process by moving more individuals into permanent housing when available, sooner.

There were specific issues related to the mobile homes in the FEMA Park. These issues were related to the many social forces that came into play. The park was closed to County and other agencies until eight months prior to initial lease end. There was significant crime from occupants due to lack of police protection and security. There was, at the highest point, an average 450 calls per month to the County Sheriff's Office at the Airport FEMA site alone for vandalism, domestic violence, theft and fear of safety. There was an ever present drug culture in the park, the root of most of the problems. There was no social support, i.e., no activity alternatives, no energy release for children, no recreational facilities, no central community center facility for families to congregate and have a sense of community, no worship facilities, no retail or convenience store for essential supplies and necessities.

During the history of the temporary housing program there was a rotation of occupants during the first twelve months. Those with the means to do so moved out into permanent housing. The early occupants were able to replace or rebuild housing, find rental housing or move into apartments that became available over time. The

emptying of units offered the opportunity to fill them with families on a FEMA waiting list. The park became a continual changing neighborhood without any neighborhood characteristics. After the initial twelve months, the Park no longer was a traditional housing project. It became a concentration of low to moderate income individuals that included persons on disability, fixed Social Security retirement, other retirement funds, welfare recipients, persons with mental and physical challenges and squatters. The occupants were of all ages, with many having their place of origin out of Charlotte County.

The travel trailers had fewer and less difficult problems associated with their use. Most were on private property with a much higher degree of motivation to move on. There were, in many cases, large families or numbers of people in each unit. It was reported, in some cases that up to twenty individuals were living in very limited and small units. Recreation vehicles are compact and not designed to live in for an extended period of time. As with the mobile homes, there was little interaction with local governments regarding local codes and the continuation of occupancy requirements. Some units were not where they were recorded to be and found on alternative sites without FEMA or County knowledge. Units were vandalized regularly by occupants and others because there was no vested ownership by occupants and no concern for them after the need left.

The Temporary Housing experience that started as “a necessary adventure in living” for most involved, quickly turned into cramped living space, extreme unit closeness to neighbors, filth, and problem ridden housing. Even though, for the most part, it was free housing, it became tense and very insecure after about six months.

If asked what we would like to see changed or done differently should the need for temporary housing arise again in this community, we would offer the following observations:

- The trailer complexes should be much smaller, fifty or less units. Larger facilities, by nature, require an “out of town” location because of the massive land requirements. This results in access problems as well as the lack of “ownership” of

occupants in their own rebuilding efforts and that of their community.

- We would seek stricter criteria for housing eligibility and continuance soon after the initial shock of the disaster has passed and a legitimate evaluation can be started.
- Individuals should be located as close to their original community as possible. This could result in participation in the rebuilding of their neighborhood by being closely involved.
- We would ask that there be stricter local code adherence enabling the local building and zoning officials' involvement in solving the long term housing problems related to rebuilding.
- In our opinion, there needs to be absolute deadlines enforced when housing is or becomes available and when the program will end under normal circumstances.
- The FEMA "partnership" with locals should be started and enhanced in the beginning to expedite the process of placement. Local community management should be instituted as soon as possible and practical. It is our opinion that FEMA is not and should not be a long term housing organization. FEMA needs to become an emergency response agency and then move onto other response needs.
- At some point early in recovery, FEMA should relinquish control of temporary housing to the agencies of federal, state and local governments that have expertise needed to assure that the goal of the program is adapted to local needs and is effective.
- The federal sources of funds that were used to staff this project could be redirected for a shorter time period, at a lower level to support the local efforts to place these people.

In conclusion, the Disaster Recovery Federal Temporary Housing Program as administered by FEMA was and is essential to protecting citizen life, limb and property after the event. Without these temporary housing units, the effects of such an event would be much more devastating. This program allows the victims of the disaster to have a relatively safe, dry and secure dwelling to bridge housing availability due to the loss of properties and the funds to rebuild or replace housing.

The Charlotte County units were well used. Approximately 80% of the original housing clients rotated out to permanent housing in the first twelve months after the event. FEMA then worked through their waiting list for placement from travel trailers to mobile homes. It was this transition that affected the viability of the program from this point forward. Placement was hindered by the lack of access to the residents for agency assistance to move the project on to closure. The unit occupant demographics became individuals that had no urgency or intention of moving on until forced. The program would not allow local FEMA staff to "evict" these individuals therefore causing a standoff with the trailer residents building resentment in the general County population and in the media.

Currently the land lease between FEMA and the County has expired without renewal. The mobile home park is now empty and being reclaimed by the removal of infrastructure and electrical services. The remaining units that were occupied have been vacated and seven remaining occupants have been moved into travel trailers in a commercial park with no date certain for finalization of this program. FEMA officially ended this program in early 2007. There remain two units that are being worked through by FEMA and the county with agency resources. The rest are not progressing through a placement process with any zeal. Charlotte County purchased seventeen (17) units from FEMA and has sold them to the occupants for continued temporary housing. Two are mobile homes that are being permanently placed in mobile home parks outside of the county. Fifteen are travel trailers that are on private property and are occupied until the adjoining property is rebuilt or replaced. If there is no building permit or if a permit expires, the travel trailer must be moved to a suitable properly zoned property. Titles for these properties have not been transferred to the final owners due to FEMA not being able to locate certificates of origin, as per FEMA staff. The price paid by the County to FEMA and then paid by the occupants to the county is \$500.00.