

Written Statement of

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**Hearing: “A New Way Home: Findings from the
Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery’s Special Report and
Working with the Obama Administration on a Way
Forward”**



FEMA

Before the

**Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC**

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2:30 pm

Good morning Senator Landrieu, Ranking Member Graham, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery; it is a privilege to appear before you today on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As always, we appreciate your interest in and continued support of the challenging field of disaster recovery, and specifically disaster housing. I particularly appreciate the opportunity today to discuss some of the complex challenges facing the disaster housing mission, and the initiatives we have underway to address those challenges.

The Department appreciates the subcommittee's thorough review of FEMA's disaster housing operations. The recently released report provides the Department and FEMA another opportunity to review its housing initiatives and programs to ensure we are maximizing all available resources, and moving forward in our efforts to improve the delivery of disaster housing. The report recognizes what we, FEMA, and all of our housing partners have continuously reiterated, which is that one of the most difficult aspects of the recovery process in disaster housing, and how those challenges intensify and increase in a catastrophe. FEMA generally agrees with the report, and notes that many of the recommendations are addressed by and reflected in the National Disaster Housing Strategy (NDHS).

Fashioning and exercising a national disaster assistance capability that quickly and accountably meets and balances the often competing needs of individuals, families, special needs populations, communities, and cost-effectiveness is an enormous challenge. The fundamental issue is not whether FEMA and our partners can find and provide provisional housing to disaster survivors, we can. The fundamental challenge is whether we can provide those disaster survivors safe and secure housing where they and their communities want it, and do so in a timely and cost-effective manner. This latter challenge is, and will remain, our *greatest* challenge.

The Committee's report calls for a number of reforms and recommendations, among them the development of a National Catastrophic Housing Plan. FEMA agrees that more

comprehensive catastrophic disaster housing planning, on a national scale, is needed. While the Federal government has the ability and the resolve to provide a tremendous amount of assistance, and we are increasing our arsenal of capabilities all the time, the character of any catastrophic response will need to be tailored to, the unique geographic, social, demographic, and physical characteristics of the impacted area. Planning must include ALL Stakeholders, especially our State, Tribal and Local partners, and be from the bottom up. Plans must clearly identify the unique housing-related gaps and requirements facing communities and jurisdictions.. Planning must prioritize restoration efforts and ultimately pave the way for Federal support to be quickly and accurately mobilized and targeted to fill those gaps and address States' priorities.

As noted in your report, FEMA completed and released, in January of this year, the National Disaster Housing Strategy, a fluid document that, for the first time, organizes the many planning and operational elements and considerations of disaster housing within a single strategic framework. It is intended to ensure a common set of principles that will allow all housing stakeholders the necessary tools to create a concrete implementation plan. This Strategy, mandated by Congress under the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, or PKEMRA, not only clarifies the variable characteristics of a disaster housing environment, but defines and outlines the intersection and interaction of Federal, State, and Local roles, responsibilities, resources, and options. Further, and perhaps most importantly, this Strategy recognizes and reinforces the need for States to plan and operationally prepare to play a much greater role in the disaster housing continuum. As we have reaffirmed the ability of the Federal government to effectively and quickly meet the needs of disaster survivors is appreciably improved when a State is an active and engaged partner. Too often, disaster housing is regarded as an exclusively Federal responsibility, rather than as assistance designed and provided to *support* and *augment* State capacity. Accordingly - and consistent with the Federal role set forth in the Stafford Act - the NDHS places substantial emphasis on the need for and importance of State-led Disaster Housing Task Forces, and strongly encourages every State to establish such a Task Force now, in advance of their next disaster. As envisioned by the Strategy, these Task Forces should be empowered to apply and leverage the full

range of housing resources available to States; as well as charged with identifying shortfalls and developing robust housing plans and strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of their vulnerable jurisdictions. Following a disaster, these State-led Task Forces would assume a more operational role, defining and characterizing the needs of affected populations, and synchronizing and guiding a unified effort, based on their advance planning, to meet those needs. Secretary Napolitano has also made her commitment to improving intergovernmental coordination. Almost immediately upon being confirmed, she issued an action directive on improving ties with State and local governments. The NDHS echoes this philosophy, by highlighting the roles and responsibilities of State and local governments, the need for closer collaboration, ensuring that the State and local governments are empowered and take the lead in determining the best and most appropriate housing options to meet the needs of the residents in their State.

While ensuring improved coordination with State and local governments, FEMA also fully recognizes the need for greater collaboration and planning at the Federal level. The Department is committed to and has made stronger efforts to improve relationships with our partner at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and to explore opportunities for the Department to more effectively engage in and collaboratively support the Federal disaster housing mission. We hope to better align our roles and responsibilities, with FEMA focusing on the immediate, emergency needs of disaster victims such as sheltering and interim housing, and HUD taking the lead with their expertise in long-term housing. Recently, Secretaries Napolitano and Donovan made a joint visit to the Gulf Coast to assess outstanding recovery needs and also collaborated on extension of disaster assistance to the residents affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. HUD has, as your report notes, a massive network of Public Housing Agencies in communities across the Nation, and those institutions have the pre-existing relationships and organic ability to work locally and directly with both tenants and landlords to secure safe and adequate rental housing, as well as provide case management assistance to housing occupants. The NDHS recognizes this and specifically calls for formalizing the HUD-FEMA partnership, to ensure we are maximizing the resources of

the Federal government being brought to bear in disaster housing operations. Recognizing the value of these Public Housing Agencies, HUD developed and implemented a Disaster Housing Assistance Program and assumed responsibility for tens of thousands of Hurricane Katrina and Rita households still receiving rental assistance from FEMA. More recently, HUD employed this Disaster Housing Assistance Program in support of the Federal response to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Make no mistake about it, this operational paradigm shift has been a learning experience for both FEMA and HUD, but we both believe the valuable lessons we are learning will help inform and guide the development of more responsive capabilities and increased efficiencies. It will also help us to develop a disaster implementation plan that will bring clarity to the specific resources, responsibilities, and roles of both FEMA and HUD.

Also, to support both the preparedness and response roles of State-led Disaster Housing Task Forces, the National Disaster Housing Strategy calls for the establishment of a complementary *National* Disaster Housing Task Force. We believe that this standing Task Force is the launching point for the NDHS. The task force is currently being organized, and will not only be staffed by Federal employees, but will engage and interact with key stakeholders at all levels of government, , the private sector, voluntary agencies and industry experts as well. To ensure input from our stakeholders, the task force will work with the National Advisory Council. The council, created by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, represents a significant cross-section of officials from across emergency management disciplines, and includes emergency response providers from State, local and tribal governments, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations.

The principal responsibilities and goals of the National Housing Task Force, in addition to overseeing implementation of the National Disaster Housing Strategy, will be to:

- Improve planning for all disaster housing response and recovery operations;
- Provide additional support to address the unique challenges of a catastrophic event;

- Build capabilities across all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector;
- Expand national resources to support preparedness; and
- Review and Assess Disaster Housing Authorities.

The Committee's report also addresses the need for more temporary housing options, recognizing that our traditional forms of direct housing, mobile homes and travel trailers, may not always be either appropriate or adequate, or available in sufficient numbers, to provide a comprehensive and timely solution to the needs of disaster survivors in a catastrophic housing environment. We agree with the need to explore all options and I am pleased to share that much ground work has been laid in order to guide informed decisions regarding options for temporary housing..

In 2006, FEMA launched a national alternative housing outreach and validation initiative, and established the Joint Housing Solutions Group to lead and sustain that effort. The Joint Housing Solutions Group, led by one of FEMA's most seasoned and experienced housing experts, Jack Schuback, brought in housing experts from both inside and outside of government to develop a template for thoroughly and authoritatively assessing the qualities of candidate temporary housing models, and encouraged manufacturers throughout the United States to submit their housing units for evaluation. As a result of and building on their efforts, in 2008 FEMA conducted a solicitation and awarded provisional contracts to seven alternative housing manufacturers. Under the supervision of the Joint Housing Solutions Group, one each of those units is in the process of being installed on the campus of FEMA's National Emergency Training Center, in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where they will be used to house students and allow the Joint Housing Solutions Group to assess how well each unit withstands the rigors of sustained occupation. The results of this carefully monitored practical assessment will help assure that the units are suitable for future use in support of disaster survivors.

FEMA is monitoring and evaluating the Alternative Housing Pilot Program. The AHPP was funded by Congress in 2006 so that FEMA could identify, develop and evaluate

alternatives to FEMA travel trailers and mobile homes, while, at the same time, providing needed housing to Hurricane Katrina and Rita disaster survivors. FEMA competitively selected pilot projects in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas for grant awards and will evaluate the projects as they progress.

The Committee's report expresses concerns about FEMA's decision to revisit the use of travel trailers as a temporary housing option. While FEMA fundamentally agrees that travel trailers, by virtue of their small size, are less-than-optimal solutions for disaster survivors, and particularly as a solution for a sustained, extended living requirement, we nevertheless must acknowledge that they may be useful in certain situations. FEMA will only consider use of travel trailers at the request of the State in extraordinary disaster conditions as a last resort, when no other form of interim housing is available, and only under the following strict conditions:

- Travel Trailers may only be authorized for use on private property.
- FEMA will not authorize Travel Trailer for use in Group Sites.
- FEMA will only authorize Travel trailer use for a maximum of six months occupancy, and only when the level of damage to the occupant's pre-disaster dwelling can be repaired in less than six months.
- FEMA will only provide Travel Trailers within formaldehyde levels the State has determined to be acceptable.

The Committee's report also discusses our recent efforts to simplify and streamline the application process for disaster survivors, and we and our Federal partners have made significant strides in this area, as well. In August 2006, President Bush signed an Executive Order, titled *Improving Assistance for Disaster Victims*, charging the Department of Homeland Security to lead an interagency effort to improve and simplify the process for disaster survivors to apply for Federal disaster assistance. On behalf of the Department, FEMA led an interagency task force in the development and implementation of a Disaster Assistance Improvement Plan that outlined a coordinated, actionable strategy to establish a consolidated and unified disaster application capability.

The fruits of this effort were realized on December 31, 2008, with the launch of DisasterAssistance.gov, a new, easy-to-use web site that consolidates information about forms of disaster assistance in one on-line location. Disaster survivors in need of assistance, including housing assistance, following a presidentially declared disaster designated for individual assistance are now able to go to DisasterAssistance.gov to register online for assistance with FEMA and other Federal agencies. This one-stop web-site improves and simplifies access to information about disaster assistance by creating a central, online location for all forms of Federal disaster aid. Sixteen Federal agencies have thus far partnered with FEMA to develop and populate the website, which currently offers more than fifty forms of assistance.

While DisasterAssistance.gov is up and operating, FEMA nevertheless continues to work with other Federal and voluntary agencies to include even more forms of assistance, to further expand the utility of this tool and better serve the needs of disaster survivors.

In addition, over the past three and a half years, Congress has added an arsenal of tools to the FEMA toolkit that dramatically influence the way we do business. One of those tools is the Rental Repair Pilot Program, which Congress authorized as part of PKEMRA legislation. This authority, which expired at the end of 2008, allowed FEMA to test and evaluate the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of coordinating and funding the timely repair of damaged multifamily dwellings, such as apartment complexes, to determine if such a capability should be permanently added to our toolbox capabilities. This pilot gave FEMA the opportunity to repair multi-family dwellings to house disaster victims. The authority was used in the State of Iowa following the Midwest floods and in the State of Texas following Hurricane Ike. FEMA is currently assessing the effectiveness of the pilot, and will provide recommendations and an analysis of those recommendations to improve the usefulness of this authority.

To summarize, while FEMA is pleased that we have made some progress on a number of fronts, we are by no means satisfied. The disaster housing environment will always be physically challenging and socially demanding, and never more so than under

catastrophic circumstances. FEMA will continue to march forward with Congress and our multilevel partners to aggressively explore new and innovative forms of housing; refine and improve delivery systems; expand and unify planning activities, and enhance our collaboration with States to improve their own disaster housing capabilities.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.