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## Waste in Katrina Response Is Cited

Housing Aid Called Inefficient in Audits

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By [Spencer S. Hsu](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Nearly eight months after Hurricane Katrina triggered the nation's largest housing crisis since the Second World War, a hastily improvised \$10 billion effort by the federal government has produced vast sums of waste and misspent funds, an array of government audits and outside analysts have concluded.

As the Federal Emergency Management Agency wraps up the initial phase of its temporary housing program -- ending reliance on cruise ships and hotels for people sent fleeing by the Aug. 29 storm -- the toll of false starts and missed opportunities appears likely to top \$1 billion and perhaps much more, according to a series of after-action studies and Department of Homeland Security reports, including one due for release today.

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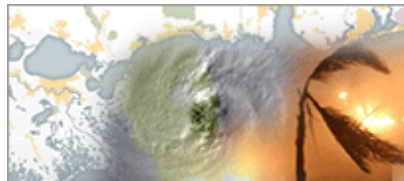
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The government's costliest initiative -- \$6.4 billion allocated to place storm survivors in temporary trailers and mobile homes -- has ground to a halt around New Orleans this week, in part because of widespread racial and class tensions. Residents of surrounding localities have refused to accept the makeshift communities.

Coverage of the Storms



### A Devastating Season

The Gulf Coast was hit hard by two massive hurricanes in the fall of 2005.

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Only 71 percent of the 141,000 trailers that FEMA estimates are needed are being occupied.

Meanwhile, the trailer program consumes more than 60 percent of funds FEMA is spending on housing aid -- even though it benefits about 10 percent of the approximately 1 million households getting help, according to agency data and the Brookings Institution, which tracks recovery progress.

By contrast, a rental assistance program is serving 800,000 families, or 80 percent of households, at about one-third the total cost, or more than \$3 billion. It was dramatically expanded four weeks after the storm -- a sluggish start, critics said -- after intense pressure from Congress and others who said the administration from the beginning should have taken advantage of such proven programs as low-income Section 8 rental vouchers.

In a recent White House report, Frances Fragos Townsend, President Bush's homeland security and counterterrorism adviser, reserved some of the toughest criticism for FEMA's mass trailer initiative. She said that it "foundered due to inadequate planning and poor coordination," and she recommended that the Department of Housing and Urban Development take over from Homeland Security in future disasters.

Citing lack of training, expertise and engagement with other agencies, Townsend's "Lessons Learned" report stated, "The Federal government's capability to provide housing solutions to the displaced Gulf Coast population has proved to be far too slow, bureaucratic, and inefficient."

FEMA officials say that they could have done better, but that Hurricane Katrina has displaced 1 million families outside their home Zip codes nearly eight months after the storm -- a far greater impact than other recent disasters.

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Spokeswoman Natalie Rule said that although FEMA is learning from critical reports, "they do not capture everything that was done well and right." She added that "the innovative housing solutions put into place in the aftermath of Katrina will now become ready solutions we can offer in future catastrophes."

Still, the weight of judgments from White House, Congress and analysts is that the housing effort is a failure with many causes, including institutional neglect, lack of funding, and poor planning, decision making and execution.

Neither FEMA nor its predecessors had ever housed hundreds of thousands of disaster victims for a prolonged period, and the collapse of its initial trailer strategy is part of what Dennis S. Mileti, former director of the National Hazards Center in Colorado, called "the largest disaster-response failure in the history of our country."

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