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FEMA Official Criticizes Trailer Plan for Evacuees

Lump-Sum Payments to Victims Urged

By Spencer S. Hsu

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The federal government's second-ranking disaster official in Louisiana yesterday criticized the Federal Emergency Management Agency's program to house Hurricane Katrina evacuees in trailers, calling the effort wasteful and counter to the long-term interest of more than 100,000 displaced families.

Instead of spending as much as \$140,000 for each trailer and site for a family to use for 18 months, the government should hand out in a lump sum the \$26,200 that Congress has approved for storm victims, Scott Wells, a FEMA official and the federal coordinating officer for Louisiana, told senators.

"This would allow [evacuees] to quickly get on with rebuilding their lives and afford them an immediate permanent housing solution. It also saves the U.S. taxpayer hundreds of thousands of dollars," Wells told the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in written remarks he submitted. "Temporary housing is not cost effective or customer-oriented."

The blunt assessment from the top deputy to Coast Guard Vice Adm. Thad W. Allen, who is in charge of the disaster response, is the first rebuke by a top FEMA official of one of the government's biggest recovery initiatives, which is bogged down more than three months after the Aug. 29 storm.

FEMA spokeswoman Nicol Andrews said that Wells spoke for himself but added that the program is under review.

"I think Mr. Wells would agree, since he has led dozens of disasters, that FEMA programs work well in the large majority of the 50 to 60 disasters declared in this country every year," Andrews said. "However, [Homeland Security Secretary Michael] Chertoff and [FEMA Acting Director R. David] Paulison have committed to review how those programs work in catastrophic situations and how they may be improved overall."

She added that Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) requested the trailers so state residents could return while they await reconstruction. Heavily damaged areas lack other housing, and not all victims are eligible for the full amount of aid.

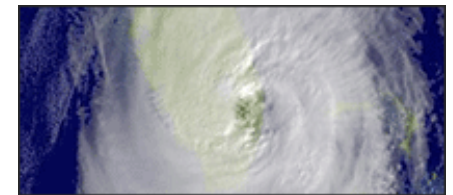
FEMA awarded without competition more than \$1 billion to four firms for temporary housing within days of the storm, but determined later that they could not meet production goals. Housing analysts condemned creation of "FEMAville" evacuee encampments, and local communities balked at hosting them.

Under fire from Congress, FEMA is rebidding the contracts, but 125,000 trailers remain on order. As of Wednesday, FEMA has installed 39,000 trailers and mobile homes. An additional 20,000 are in place or await sites.

Meanwhile, about 1.6 million families are approved for FEMA hurricane assistance. About 800,000 households have received cash aid, and 519,000 families have gotten help with their rent, at a total cost of \$3.3 billion.

A federal court in New Orleans is set to hear a request today to order a temporary halt to FEMA's plans to stop paying for 41,000 hotel rooms for evacuees, beginning Dec. 15. The class-action lawsuit was brought by 14 evacuees who say the agency has failed to provide other assistance as required under law.

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FEMA says it is trying to move families into a three-month, \$2,368 rental aid program and end the hotel subsidy, which costs more than \$2,000 a month per room. But apartment industry and low-income housing advocates say that program, too, has been poorly implemented, with little notice or guidance to landlords or evacuees.

"I have long believed that it would have been far more effective at this stage for FEMA to have given vouchers for housing and to assist people in finding private-sector housing," said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), chairman of a panel investigating the response. "I think it still is a possibility."

Wells's testimony came as House and Senate members stepped up criticism of the efforts by FEMA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the Gulf, and top FEMA officials in Gulf states described a listing of problems.

Senior FEMA aides warned then-Director Michael D. Brown in June 2004 that response teams were unprepared and understaffed. After the hurricane, they found that Gulf state and local officials lacked familiarity with national emergency plans, and that programs for individuals are confusing, inadequate and contradictory, Wells said.

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