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Editorial

Stonewalling the Katrina Victims

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Public outrage is clearly growing over the federal government's woefully inadequate program for housing the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Last week a group of survivors filed the first of what are likely to be several lawsuits alleging that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has failed to live up to its responsibilities. The recovery effort has been subject to blistering criticism from conservative, nonpartisan and liberal groups alike.

The same basic question is this: Why did the Bush administration focus on trailer parks built by FEMA - which is actually not a housing agency - instead of giving the lead role to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which has so much experience on this issue?

Many, including the Brookings Institution and the conservative Heritage Foundation, urged the administration to switch on HUD's famously successful Section 8 program, which gives families government vouchers to find decent housing in the private real estate market. That program worked well after the 1994 Northridge earthquake in California. But the White House - which seems less interested in conservative philosophy about how to make

government programs work than with simply cutting the amount of money that gets spent on poor people - has been working feverishly to cripple HUD and destroy the Section 8 voucher program for years.

So the administration rigged up a hastily thought out program that is less flexible and less helpful than Section 8 - and confusing in the bargain. Still focused on tax cuts for the wealthy, the administration is apparently hoping that people who need housing will be frustrated by the difficult process of applying for federal relief dollars and simply give up and go away.

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