

S 1668 Should include Alabama Katrina Victims – July 1, 2007 Mobile Press; July 8 Anniston Star; July 15 Tuscaloosa News

The Alabama legacy of Hurricane Katrina

By Zack Carter
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"We lost everything due to Hurricane Katrina, all of our clothes, furniture, pictures that cannot be replaced. ... We have 4 teenagers and 2 adults living in the camper that FEMA has provided for us. It gets extremely stressful with all of us in here. ... There have been many times that I just wanted to throw my hands up and give up but I know that is not what God would want me to do."

Tammy Collier of Alabama Port, hit hard by Hurricane Katrina, wrote this statement to the Bay Area Food Bank on Jan. 23, 2007. She is one of more than 2,000 Alabama Hurricane Katrina survivors still stuck in FEMA campers — and hundreds more doubled up in single-family homes— desperately waiting for the release of Federal Community Development Block Grant funds that were allocated last summer.

"The state's failure to provide for these citizens contradicts the federal funding program's intent to assist low- to moderate-income people, and violates Alabama's own stated objective to address unmet needs," said Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law in Washington, D.C. The committee was formed in 1963 at the request of President Kennedy to involve the private bar in providing legal services to address racial discrimination.

The Lawyers' Committee, Alabama Arise, the Center for Fair Housing Inc. in Mobile and South Bay Communities Alliance in Coden have joined several other national and local organizations and hundreds of individuals to protest Alabama's treatment of low-income and minority Hurricane Katrina survivors in towns on the Alabama Gulf Coast.

The CDBGs designated for unincorporated Mobile County and the city of Mobile will serve only about 10 percent of the Katrina survivors who applied last January (including Collier). Last May, Collier told Alabama Arise members at Providence Hospital in Mobile that her family has yet to receive a response to their application to rebuild their small frame home. As late as June 22, Collier still had heard nothing.

In 2005 Congress appropriated \$11.5 billion in CDBGs to help hurricane-devastated coastal states rebuild. Of the \$11.5 billion, Alabama has received just under \$100 million, only 20 percent of which has been allocated to housing redevelopment. Almost two years after Katrina, they still have not been released.

The circumstances remain all the more dire for residents of unincorporated towns along the Alabama Gulf Coast, where the majority of low-income and minority residents are still waiting for assistance. These unincorporated towns — like Coden, with a population of 3,000 — suffered tremendous damage from the storm but have seen none of the CDBG money.

In large part, this neglect is due to Alabama's misguided plan for allocating the funds. Under the state's Hurricane Katrina Action Plan for Disaster Recovery, counties and municipalities compete to secure CDBG funds, which they then apply to infrastructure projects or pass along to individuals to rebuild their homes. Under this system, unincorporated towns cannot apply, but must rely on their counties to compete for the money.

In the last round of CDBG funding, Mobile County severely undervalued the needs of unincorporated areas. The County Commission secured only \$8.4 million for housing rehabilitation, to be spread across the entire county — including Coden and the several other unincorporated towns hit by the storm — as well as the city of Mobile. In sharp contrast, the incorporated town of Bayou La Batre,

neighbor to Coden in south Mobile County, was able to secure \$37 million in CDBG funding for its population of only 2,725.

The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs is now preparing to distribute a second round of federal Hurricane Katrina Emergency Relief CDBGs. Recently several national and local groups wrote to ADECA Director Bill Johnson, warning that the process for distributing this money has put unincorporated residents at a disadvantage, pitting them in competition against neighboring incorporated cities in their own county and forcing them to rely on the overburdened Mobile County to provide for them. The groups also call on Alabama to conduct a comprehensive unmet-needs assessment along the coast to document the overwhelming needs of low-income and minority residents. With official concrete numbers, they can advocate for new sources of assistance.

There also are serious health concerns associated with the FEMA campers. Coden community leader Paul Nelson was interviewed by The Nation magazine on Feb. 14. His mother, Hilda Nelson, a lifetime resident of Coden, died suddenly last October. The Nation documented the fact that like tens of thousands of survivors of hurricanes Katrina and Rita across the Gulf Coast, Nelson also had to contend with excessive levels of toxic formaldehyde vapor emanating from the particle board in her FEMA camper.

“Isn’t it outrageous that nearly two years later, 400 families are still living in FEMA trailers in South Mobile County?” asked Kimble Forrister, state coordinator of Alabama Arise. “Isn’t it outrageous that neither the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs nor Mobile County has yet conducted an unmet-needs assessment and that only about 100 families will get housing funds — out of the 1,200 who applied for the latest round of CDBG funds?”

These issues were aired June 25 at a meeting of the Mobile County Commission. Teresa Bettis, director of the Center for Fair Housing, reported, “We were encouraged to hear Commissioner Mike Dean pledge to join with advocates to ask Sen. Richard Shelby and Gov. Riley to support the Gulf Coast Recovery Act and to push for funding for Alabama Katrina victims.”

We urge everyone to call on Alabama’s Congressional delegation, especially Sen. Shelby, as the ranking member of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, to support the Gulf Coast Recovery Act of 2007 and to ask that funding for Alabama be added to the bill.

Zack Carter is an organizer for Arise Citizens’ Policy Project.