

Gulf Coast Recovery Act must include Alabama funding

By Jim Fuller, president of South Bay Communities Alliance, Coden, Alabama; and Zack Carter, Alabama Arise organizer.

Until she was 9 years old, Caleigh Lee had a room of her own in her family's pretty blue three-bedroom cottage in Coden, on Alabama's Gulf Coast. Then Hurricane Katrina demolished the house, leaving only its roof lying on the ground. For the next three weeks the Lee family lived in tents. FEMA brought one camper to provide temporary shelter for Caleigh and her parents, her two teenage brothers, her sister-in-law, and her five-month-old niece, Camrynn. Her brother David quit high school and started working construction full-time with his father; four months later, he had saved enough money to move his young family to an apartment -- 12 miles from his home. Caleigh's parents then moved into a shed so that Caleigh and her brother Josh could have more room in the camper.

On the second anniversary of the storm, Caleigh, now 11 years old, told her story to WKRG-TV. Sitting on the tailgate of her father's pick-up, roughly equal in length to the FEMA camper, Caleigh described the family's quarters as "crammed up" and "like with no privacy." Her parents, Faye and Tommy Lee, showed pictures of their home, and explained that, although its market value is \$85,000, the insurance company paid only \$1,203 for wind damage, claiming that rising water destroyed the rest. Mrs. Lee, who works full-time at a daycare center, told the television reporter: "I pick myself up and say, 'You know, we might have a house here one day.'" Then, unable to hold back tears, she said, "But then I think, 'Why get your hopes up to get knocked back down?' So, I give up. I'm just that close. It gets harder and harder. I'm on the list for a block grant. I was 508 on the list of turning my paperwork in. I'm still waiting."

Faye Lee is referring to Katrina Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs), the largest source of federal Katrina relief set aside by Congress a year and a half ago for people who had problems with their home insurance claims or lacked coverage. Even before the grant process began, longtime residents of Coden, Mon Luis, Heron Bay, Delta Port and Alabama Port saw that the needs of their unincorporated maritime communities were being overlooked in the storm recovery efforts. For moral support and unified advocacy, they

founded South Bay Communities Alliance and began voicing their concerns to local officials and media. The Lees joined, hoping that someone would listen. Faye stood in line last January to receive a grant application -- along with three thousand other Katrina Survivors from Mobile County and the City of Mobile.

Ten months later, none of the money has been released. As a result, hundreds of Alabamians like the Lees, including many children and elderly people, remain in FEMA campers more than two years after the storm and one year after environmental tests revealed dangerous levels of formaldehyde in the temporary housing. Hundreds more are doubled- and tripled-up in single-family homes.

When the grants do become available, they will serve only 10 percent of the 1,200 families whose applications were processed; hundreds of other eligible recipients were unable to meet the application deadline. Mobile County Commissioner Mike Dean, CDBG Grant Program Administrator Kathy McHugh, Alabama Arise, Fair Housing Inc., and South Bay Communities Alliance sent a joint letter last summer asking Sen. Richard Shelby to support the Gulf Coast Recovery Act, S 1668, and to include funding for Alabama.

In September, Alabama Arise and its 155 church and civic member organizations, including the South Bay group, voted to make fair and adequate Katrina relief one of the coalition's priority issues for the coming year. Arise is asking for two things:

- That Senator Shelby and other political, religious and community leaders follow Commissioner Dean's example and publicly endorse S 1668. The bill could come to a floor vote before Thanksgiving.
- For an official assessment of storm-related needs in south Mobile County. Because of the limited funding, county officials suspended damage inspections after only 60 percent of the 1,200 grant applicants had received site visits. Of the 726 homes inspected, 81 were found to be totally destroyed. Faye and Tommy Lee are among the 474 homeowners not yet granted an inspection.

Indeed, it keeps getting harder for Faye Lee and her family. They've recently been told that they may get an inspection by Christmas, but that there is only enough grant money to serve about 200 of the applicants. Her husband Tommy told WKRG that FEMA backed off an earlier agreement to sell the camper and wants him to leave a community where his family has lived for generations.

But Tommy and Faye Lee aren't leaving. The day before their TV interview, on the second anniversary of Katrina, a delegation from south Mobile County made its case before a nationally televised town hall meeting of 700 people in New Orleans. Joining them on the panel was the sponsor of the House version of S 1668, Rep. Maxine Waters of California. She commended the group for calling attention to Alabama's hidden chapter of the Katrina story.

Last month, 13 Alabamians – including members of South Bay Communities Alliance and their allies SOS Boat People from Bayou La Batre and Bay Area Women Coalition – took the Lee's story and similar ones to Washington, D.C. The racially diverse group joined Katrina Survivors from Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas in the newly formed "Equity and Inclusion Coalition" at a hearing on S 1668 before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing & Urban Affairs, on which Senator Shelby is the ranking Republican member. He saved them front-row seats.

These hardworking, hard-pressed Alabamians were encouraged to hear Senator Shelby acknowledge their unmet needs on national TV. Their hopes were further lifted when Shelby asked Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, co-author of the bill, if she would assure that Alabama's needs would be covered, and she responded with an emphatic 'Yes.'

Shelby sent staff representatives to the Mobile County Commission for a follow-up meeting October 4. The parties have agreed to reconvene early next month in south Mobile County. The Lees and their neighbors invite Senator Shelby to come visit them and any of the thousands of Mobile countians still trapped between the havoc of Katrina and the threat of homelessness.