

ORAL STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISASTER RECOVERY
OF THE
U.S. SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
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Chairwoman Landrieu, Senator Stevens, distinguished members of the subcommittee; thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the challenges of disaster housing, and specifically FEMA's recent release of a draft National Disaster Housing Strategy. This draft Strategy was released last Wednesday to initiate a 60-day public comment period. And, as required by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, has specifically been provided to the FEMA National Advisory Committee and the National Council on Disabilities as well as all pertinent Federal departments and agencies for their review and comment. I expect to engage with these groups and many others over the next 60 days, actively seeking comment and suggestions such that, later in the Fall, we can release the final Strategy and embark on deliberate course to achieve the vision and goals outlined in the Strategy.

The draft National Disaster Housing Strategy is likely one of the most significant documents prepared by FEMA and released under the umbrella of the National Response Framework. The Strategy describes how the Nation currently provides housing to those affected by disaster. And, more importantly, it charts a new direction of where our disaster housing efforts must focus if we, as a Nation, are to better understand and meet the emergent disaster housing needs of disaster victims and communities.

This Strategy captures lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters, embraces the larger issues of disaster victims beyond simply providing a structure; seeks innovative and creative housing options; elevates issues of safety, security and access to those with disabilities; emphasizes again and again the value of planning; differentiates the catastrophe above all other disasters; and, for the first time in any single document, addresses all forms of housing and suggests that these issues merit full time attention before and between disaster, not the traditional just-in-time, short term and sporadic term interest just after a specific disaster.

There are three attributes of the Strategy that distinguish its purpose: First – The Strategy is in fact a strategy – it is the essential precursor to a plan, but intentionally not a plan in itself. As a strategy, it captures the challenges of disaster housing, clarifies roles and responsibilities, establishes key principles and sets course for new directions and pragmatic solutions in sheltering, interim housing and permanent housing. As a strategy, it describes a national vision and strategic goals, key building blocks for plans, policies and procedures. Its purpose is to frame the issue, engage collaborative discussion, and ensure that every subsequent action taken contributes to strengthening disaster housing capabilities across every jurisdiction. Differentiating a

strategy from a plan is not an issue of semantics; it is an issue of leadership to effectively meet our shared objectives.

Second, this Strategy is imbued with the imperative that disaster housing solutions be defined and achieved collaboratively. Addressing the challenges of disaster housing should not be driven from the Federal level. Rather, we must provide the leadership, set the pace and actively engage and gain commitment from individuals, communities, States, Federal partners, NGOs and the private sector if we are to accomplish the vision and goals of disaster housing. The Strategy and its plan for implementation do just that.

Third, this Strategy embraces the need for immediate action by framing FEMA's establishment of a standing National Disaster Housing Task Force charged specifically to aggressively implement the Strategy. Far from passing the buck, reassigning duties, handing off or outsourcing the problem; FEMA will own the strategy, retain responsibility and lead the charge and reach to representatives of state and local governments, people with disabilities, NGOs, the private sector, individuals and other constituents to implement the Strategy and achieve its purpose. While we may not have described the Task Force as well as we could have, one point should be very clear, there is no other entity in government or elsewhere that offers a full time, daily focus and commitment to addressing what you, Madame Chairwoman, and most disaster victims would describe as one of the most important elements of disaster response and recovery – that being disaster housing.

While this Strategy had only been in public view for just a day more than one week, it has drawn a number of comments: some favorable and some not. On the downside, I acknowledge the document is late – it was due in July last year. I apologize for FEMA that we

did not meet that date. But, I assert that the time was well spent as we continued to learn, understand and appreciate the many elements of disaster housing. We could not have produced this document one year ago. I trust that the value of having a Strategy will overshadow the late date of its delivery.

Another criticism is that the Strategy is not responsive to its requirements as set forth in PKEMRA. While a fair observation of the draft Strategy, every element specified in PKEMRA will be contained in the final version of the Strategy. Yet, the point must be made that absent this document, the collection of the specifications in PKEMRA would not have made a strategy as collectively, they do not create a vision or an integrated set of goals. Yet, with this Strategy as the foundation and with the standing National Disaster Housing Task Force as the engine, the specifications enumerated in PKEMRA will find their value.

On the positive side of the ledger, there are those who recognize the value of a strategy, and see that we, for the first time in a single document, have described all of the elements of disaster housing in terms of challenges and new directions. There are those who appreciate recognition of the broader human needs as an element of the disaster housing. And, there are those who are standing in the aisles, even now, ready to support the implementation efforts of the National Disaster Housing Task Force.

Madam Chairwoman, as you and your staff took pen to paper and had a large hand in drafting the requirement for the Strategy within PKEMRA, I trust that you as well see that this Strategy meets your purpose to establish valuable and pragmatic public policy that will elevate preparedness and provide better assistance to disaster victims. While understandable impatient that this could not have been accomplished long ago, I trust that the point now is to draw in the State and local partners, Federal partners, the NGOs, the privates sector, and all of those with an

equity in disaster housing to roll up their sleeves do the work necessary to develop plans and, more importantly, the capabilities to implement effective disaster housing plans, for all hazards, for disasters from small to catastrophic, and to meet the full and broader needs of disaster victims. FEMA recognizes those challenges, and is ready to provide the leadership to accomplish all of those objectives.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I am prepared to respond to your questions.