

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson****“Examining the Roles and Responsibilities of HUD and FEMA in Responding to the Affordable Housing Needs of Gulf Coast States following Emergencies and Natural Disasters”**

June 4, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Communication, Preparedness, and Response Subcommittee joint hearing with the Financial Services Committee entitled “Examining the Roles and Responsibilities of HUD and FEMA in Responding to the Affordable Housing Needs of Gulf Coast States following Emergencies and Natural Disasters”:

“We are here to examine the Federal Government’s role in providing affordable housing to disaster victims in the wake of catastrophes.

Specifically, this hearing gives us an opportunity to explore the difficulties encountered by Federal, State, and local governments during their effort to provide housing to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

But perhaps more importantly, this hearing will allow us to study the effectiveness of the Federal Government’s current emergency housing programs and look ahead to determine how disaster victims can be better served in the future.

June 1st marked the beginning of the 2008 Hurricane Season. So this hearing comes at a critical time. We cannot afford to be ill-prepared should another Hurricane strike.

I think everyone will agree that the Federal Government was not prepared to meet the housing needs of disaster victims along the Gulf Coast in 2005.

For this reason, and others, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Reform Act requiring FEMA to submit a National Disaster Housing Strategy to Congress by July 2007. It is 11 months late, but I am being told that it will be finalized soon.

As we enter the third hurricane season since Katrina. FEMA still doesn’t have this important Housing Strategy and we still have over 22,000 families along the Gulf Coast living in temporary homes.

We all know the Center for Disease Control and Prevention recently tested many of these homes and said that they are not safe.

What is so deeply disturbing to me is that many of the families who are living in these housing units are the people who most desperately need our help.

How is it possible that the Congress has sent hundreds of millions of dollars to the Gulf Coast, yet these families are still suffering?

These are the families that are unable to afford rent for a new apartment, let alone buy a new home.

I think Deputy Administrator Harvey Johnson gave an accurate review of FEMA’s current housing strategy in a recent AP article when he said, and I quote, ‘We are putting our head in the sand.’

FEMA's answer to the housing crisis on the Gulf Coast has been to move families into hotels and motels without guaranteeing them any type of permanent solution.

Meanwhile, my home state decided to redirect \$600 million dollars intended for the construction of low and middle income housing to a port expansion project.

While I agree that expanding the port will benefit the Gulf's economy, I have serious doubts as to whether the new port workers are going to have anywhere to live.

As I mentioned, there are over 22,000 families still living in FEMA temporary units. There are about 6,000 rental properties available in Mississippi and Louisiana combined, and even less in the disaster area.

I am looking to FEMA and HUD to provide this panel with some level of confidence that the Federal Government will be able to find every family currently living in a temporary housing unit a locally based affordable home.

Unfortunately, we can't rewrite the wrongs of the past, but we can make certain that we do better moving forward.

Today I hope to get a clear explanation from both FEMA and HUD as to why they have been unable to meet the housing needs of the residents of the Gulf Coast.

More importantly, I am looking forward to hearing our witnesses propose new solutions to an old problem."

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