

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Chairman



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Ensuring Safe and Effective Housing Programs in the Wake of Disasters”

January 29, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Ensuring Safe and Effective Housing Programs in the Wake of Disasters”:

“This hearing will provide Members of the Committee with the opportunity to discuss the unprecedented challenges facing Federal, State, and local governments in their efforts to house the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, assess the safety and effectiveness of current emergency housing programs, and examine the plans being developed to ensure that our nation will be better prepared to meet the future housing needs of disaster victims.

Nearly two and half years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck, the people along the Gulf Coast are still coping with its aftermath and struggling to recover.

In order for our nation to truly be resilient, the lessons we have learned from this catastrophe cannot be ignored.

One of the most striking lessons we learned was that this country was ill-prepared to provide emergency housing to victims of a major catastrophe. To house the number of individuals who lost their homes during Katrina and Rita, FEMA was forced to immediately purchase thousands of travel trailers.

By the time the dust settled, FEMA had purchased over 100,000 of these units.

However, as months and years passed, it became clear that travel trailers may not have been the best option. As early as April 2006, concerns were raised publicly about high levels of formaldehyde in many of the travel trailers provided by FEMA.

Medical experts have stated that the negative health effects from prolonged exposure to high levels of formaldehyde can range anywhere from respiratory irritation to cancer.

After pressure from Congress, health experts and community organizations, FEMA announced that they would enter into an agreement with the CDC to test the trailers for formaldehyde, and to study what associated health impacts may have been encountered.

However, it was not until December 21, 2007, that the CDC actually began testing formaldehyde levels in travel trailers and mobile homes.

That is over a year and half after the first reports of high formaldehyde surfaced.

This delay is unacceptable. I look forward to getting a clear explanation from both FEMA and CDC as to why testing was delayed for so long.

Even more troubling is the recent discovery that FEMA directed the CDC to not investigate, or communicate, the health effects associated with prolonged exposure to formaldehyde.

The Committee recently came into possession of internal CDC emails which show that despite the efforts of CDC professionals to bring these health risk to the public's attention, these concern were thwarted by CDC leadership for roughly 8 months.

I hope that our witnesses can shed some light on this issue by explaining why FEMA directed the CDC to exclude discussion of the long term health risks, and why the CDC complied.

In addition, while I am pleased that the testing of the air quality has finally commenced, I worry that the damage may have already been done.

I look forward to hearing about FEMA and the CDC's plans to monitor and treat the long-term health effects of people who have lived in FEMA trailers or mobile homes in the Gulf.

While we can't turn back the clock to prevent this debacle, we can make certain that this problem will not be encountered during future disasters.

That is why I, along with some of my colleagues on this Committee, introduced the Safe and Healthy Emergency Housing Act to protect disaster victims by requiring that any emergency housing units provided by FEMA meet HUD regulations limiting formaldehyde emissions.

Finally, in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Congress allocated billions of dollars through the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) to the Gulf Coast states, to address housing and infrastructure needs.

I look forward to hearing how that funding is being allocated by HUD and how effective the states have been in using that money to help victims of those disasters.

Specifically, I am interested in learning why HUD has yet again waived the low income regulations associated with the CDBG program for the State of Mississippi and approved a diversion of nearly \$600 million dollars intended for housing relief to a port improvement project."

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