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FEMA

**“FEMA Housing: An Examination of Current Problems and
Innovative Solutions”**

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Good morning Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member King, and other distinguished Members of the Committee on Homeland Security. It is a privilege to appear before you today on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As always, we appreciate your interest in, and continued support of, FEMA's mission to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

Mr. Chairman, disaster housing may be among the most challenging and complex missions facing our agency, and the nation, following a catastrophic event. No aspect of recovery is more critical to the timely and sustainable revitalization of a disaster-impacted community than the return of its citizens and workforce, and no aspect of recovery is more critical to supporting their return than the availability of housing. This situation will be most acute in catastrophic environments where the level of damage is so severe that locally available rental resources are insufficient to meet the needs of the displaced. Such situations are enormously challenging, but a challenge that we, as a nation, must be prepared to meet.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear. Disaster housing, particularly in a catastrophic incident environment, is not a mission that FEMA can or will ever be able to handle alone. While we certainly have the ability and are prepared to bring an enormous number of financial and material resources to bear, the sheer size, scope, and duration of a catastrophic housing mission requires the coordinated involvement and aggressive

engagement of multiple federal agencies, state, local and tribal governments, the private sector, and voluntary agencies. Only by working together, and leveraging all of our respective strengths and capabilities, can we achieve the kind of timely and comprehensive housing response that disaster survivors need and that our nation has come to expect.

FEMA's housing programs are, as mandated by the Stafford Act, temporary. By law, the President may provide temporary housing assistance for no more than 18 months, unless he determines that conditions are so extraordinary as to warrant an extension.

Accordingly, FEMA has focused its efforts on developing temporary housing assistance that will provide a timely but interim bridge to disaster survivors while they seek more permanent, stable, and long-term housing solutions. Within that framework, FEMA considers pre-existing rental resources as a preferred temporary housing solution, and employs temporary housing units only as a last resort, when existing housing and rental resources in and around a community have been virtually destroyed, rendered uninhabitable, or exhausted. Such was the case in the States of Louisiana and Mississippi following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and more recently in coastal areas of Texas following Hurricane Ike. The lack of available housing and rental resources was so acute that temporary housing units were the only viable solution for those survivors who wanted to remain close to their homes, close to their jobs, close to their neighbors, or close to their children's schools. In such situations, temporary housing units, whether traditional units, such as travel trailers; or newer alternative units, such as Katrina-type cottages, may play a huge role in just how quickly a small community is able to rebound

from a disaster and begin the march to recovery. Community recovery may be faster if disaster affected communities identify strategies to integrate these alternative units permanently into their communities, rather than viewing them solely as an alternative to temporary housing units.

FEMA plays a critical role in finding rental resources for survivors following a disaster. While securing temporary housing in or near an impacted community for every disaster survivor or household that needs such assistance is not always possible, FEMA can quickly relocate survivors to where temporary housing is available. During large-scale events, such relocations, potentially at a significant distance from the impacted community, are often inevitable. Our challenge remains facilitating their return as quickly as possible, so that they can help their communities recover.

As I've mentioned, we employ temporary housing units as a last resort, when other forms of housing are unavailable. Utilization of local rental resources is preferred, as such housing not only provides a better quality living environment and is suitable for long-term occupation, but the use of such housing contributes to the local economy. To help facilitate the timely movement of survivors into – and monitored occupancy of – rental resources, FEMA's partner, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), has developed the Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which allows HUD to leverage their network of Public Housing Authorities across the nation to organize and manage survivor placement, including case management assistance. HUD piloted the Disaster

Housing Assistance Program following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and subsequently reprised the program in response to Hurricanes Ike and Gustav.

With that said, when FEMA is confronted with an event of catastrophic magnitude, the need for housing will most likely outstrip locally or regionally available rental resources, and require augmentation from traditional and non-traditional forms of temporary housing units. Accordingly, FEMA maintains a baseline inventory of various types of temporary housing units at several storage locations around the country, to provide an initial and immediate delivery capability while our multiple contract suppliers ramp up sustained production. Our inventory includes manufactured housing, park models, and travel trailers, a subset of which is specifically designed to be accessible to special needs occupants.

Recent Improvements and Initiatives

While our work is not yet complete, we have made significant progress in a number of key areas related to disaster housing.

In January of this year, FEMA released the National Disaster Housing Strategy, which provides, for the first time, an overarching framework for a national disaster housing effort. The Strategy is intended to bring together all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector to meet the urgent housing needs of disaster victims and enable individuals, households and communities to rebuild following a disaster. The Strategy draws on best practices and lessons learned to identify

actions that must be taken to improve disaster housing assistance, an effort that involves renewing our focus on planning, building baseline capabilities, and providing a broader range of disaster housing options. It describes key principles; responsibilities and roles; and current practices in sheltering, interim housing, and permanent housing. The Strategy is based on a fundamental understanding that disaster housing is more than simply providing a structure, but must also address the complex needs of disaster victims. Disaster housing efforts must address human needs and connect to a broad range of community-based services. The Strategy also discusses future directions for how the nation can work together to achieve national disaster housing goals. This includes reviewing best practices and innovations to establish baseline capabilities and core competencies; validating roles and responsibilities; and improving the range, quality, and timeliness of disaster housing services provided by communities, states, and the federal government. For example, the Strategy calls for innovative approaches to meet diverse needs of disaster victims and reduce shelter demands by improving resilience and accelerating repairs. It also calls for a broader range of interim housing options to meet diverse needs. In addition, the Strategy established the National Disaster Housing Task Force, which will be staffed by national-level representatives from several Federal agencies. The Task Force will engage and interact with key stakeholders at all levels of government, as well as with the private sector, industry, and voluntary agencies.

In April and May 2009, FEMA convened organizational meetings of the National Disaster Housing Task Force with representatives of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Small

Business Administration, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. First drafts of an implementation plan, a concept of operations, a National Disaster Housing Task Force charter and an organizational chart, as well as guidance for the State-led Housing Task Forces Charter, Organizational Chart, and Implementation Plan have been developed, and are currently being reviewed by the partner agencies. Next steps for the Task Force include finalizing these documents, and continuing outreach activities and coordination to identify resources and gaps in the disaster housing arena. We will continue to keep you updated on these efforts.

We also released an updated 2009 Disaster Housing Plan, a streamlined document that operationalizes guidance contained in the National Disaster Housing Strategy, and describes the specific types of assistance that FEMA will provide to support state, local and tribal governments in meeting the housing needs of disaster survivors when FEMA's Individual Assistance Programs are authorized under a presidentially declared disaster.

With regard to temporary housing units, we have made tremendous progress in improving the quality of our units. We have redefined and made even more stringent the specifications for every unit that FEMA procures in support of disaster survivors, to ensure these units are the safest available in terms of air quality. This includes new and more rigorous specifications for travel trailers, which are once again a part of our temporary housing arsenal. As you know, the use of travel trailers was suspended for a period of time, following concerns with formaldehyde. However, a number of States have made it clear that they want travel trailers to remain a part of our inventory, and in many cases, a travel trailer is the only unit that will fit on suburban private property. To

further meet the needs of disaster survivors and the desires of our state customers, FEMA awarded, in April 2009, four contracts for the manufacture of low emissions travel trailers with improved air exchange. The contractors are required to build, deliver and conduct air quality testing for temporary housing units for up to five years. This contract award represents the agency's continuing commitment to identify new alternative housing solutions to supplement the array of solutions available to best meet the complex, disaster-related housing needs of the survivors and the states we support.

Travel trailers are not suitable for those who need a housing solution for a prolonged period of time; however, they provide an invaluable resource to states with homeowners who need a shorter period of time to repair their homes and whose property cannot accommodate other types of housing units, such as park models or manufactured housing. I am pleased that we have been able to produce FEMA-specification travel trailers with improved air quality standards and increased air exchange to help address health care concerns that were identified as a result of the 2005 hurricane season.

One of our areas of greatest progress has been in the area of exploring new forms of alternative temporary housing. Our Joint Housing Solutions Group completed an initial assessment of numerous candidate alternative units, culminating in the award of a competitive contract for seven different models. Under this contract, FEMA has had each of the vendors build and install a prototype unit at our National Emergency Training Center, in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where we can closely monitor and evaluate their quality and durability as students occupy these units throughout the year. While our

contract allows us to purchase multiple units to support a disaster housing response immediately should the need arise, these prototypes allow us to assess these units in controlled conditions across all four seasons, and will help us determine whether these units will become part of our permanent capability inventory. Additional alternative units are also being evaluated in Galveston, Texas, and are supporting actual Hurricane Ike-displaced households.

In 2006, Congress appropriated \$400 million to FEMA for a pilot program to identify and evaluate new alternatives for housing disaster survivors. This Alternative Housing Pilot Program encouraged state-of-the-art engineering standards designed to maximize structural strength, durability, and energy efficiency. Four States received competitive grants: Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, and all have commenced or completed construction of their units. Once the evaluation period is complete, these models could potentially be used in response to future disasters. We look forward to fully assessing these pilot projects, and anticipate that they will provide valuable housing lessons for application in future disasters.

FEMA is also evaluating the lessons learned from our Rental Repair Pilot Program, which Congress authorized as part of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act. This pilot program, which expired at the end of 2008, allowed FEMA to test and evaluate the utility and cost-effectiveness of coordinating and funding the timely repair of damaged multifamily dwellings, such as apartment complexes. Pilots were conducted in both Iowa and Texas, and our findings are reflected in a report that was recently

submitted to Congress. Those findings will assist us in determining if such a capability should be permanently added to our recovery authorities.

As I noted earlier, FEMA cannot and should not handle a disaster housing mission alone. Recognizing the critical role that States should play in the planning and character of any disaster housing response, the National Disaster Housing Strategy called for the establishment of State-led Housing Task Forces. The concept of a State-led Housing Task Force grew out of lessons learned during the California Wildfires in 2007. The State of California and FEMA established a joint State and federal housing task force to coordinate housing issues, including resources, zoning and code concerns, services for survivors, and other areas of mutual interest. This idea was formalized in the National Disaster Housing Strategy. The State-led Disaster Housing Task Force empowers states to have a decision-making role in providing disaster housing options at the beginning of a disaster, as well as encourages States to effectively plan and organize for the multifaceted dimensions of a housing mission before a disaster. These task forces have proven successful in the States of Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Missouri. Partnering State Agencies typically include State Departments of Health, Housing, Community Development, General Services, Human Services, and numerous private non-profits such as Habitat for Humanity, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and local low-income and accessible housing groups to ensure that the housing needs of all affected populations are met.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, while FEMA has made impressive progress improving our temporary housing assistance programs, I clearly recognize that we – FEMA and our partners across the nation – have much more work to do. It will be a challenge, but it is a challenge I accept. I know I will be able to count on your support.

Thank you. This concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions the committee may have.