



THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

STATEMENT OF
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“FEMA Housing: An Examination of Current Problems and Innovative Solutions.”

House Committee on Homeland Security

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Introduction

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member King, and members of the Committee — good morning. I am Erica Rioux Gees, AIA, an architect from Amherst, Massachusetts, and a member of the national Board of Directors of the American Institute of Architects.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you to discuss disaster assistance and housing issues. There are strong connections between the dual challenges of post-disaster housing and sustainable approaches to mitigation and long-term recovery. We believe that architects and their allied design and construction professionals are ideally and uniquely suited to help FEMA, state and local emergency management agencies and communities address these challenges.

As an associate with Kuhn Riddle Architects, a 17-person architecture, planning and interior design firm in Amherst, MA, I focus on the master planning, and design of multi-family housing, commercial and institutional projects. I currently serve as the Massachusetts statewide Disaster Coordinator for the AIA and have previously served on the AIA's National Disaster Assistance Committee and Disaster Assistance Task Force. I also have served on numerous AIA Sustainable Design Assessment Teams (SDATs) in communities across the country, including Louisiana, Washington, Florida, Hawaii and Massachusetts.

I would like to share with the Committee some information about the work of the AIA and architects to support mitigation and recovery efforts, discuss the role of architects and other design professionals in helping communities recover and rebuild from both natural and man-made disasters, and provide some thoughts about the key issues affecting post-disaster housing and community recovery.

The AIA Disaster Assistance Program

The AIA is comprised of more than 83,000 licensed architects, architects-in-training and allied professionals across the country. Through our Disaster Assistance Program, we are training and mobilizing architects to help communities recover from disasters.

The Program dates back to 1972, when the AIA formally recognized the important role that architects can play in disaster response. In Washington, DC, members and staff began developing strategies to assist member components to respond quickly to requests for aid.

Several state and local components, including Texas, California, Florida, Kansas, and New York, began to develop programs to provide assistance to communities struck by disasters. The program coordinates with local AIA components and the larger disaster response community to train locally based teams of volunteer architects to respond in the event of a disaster. A dedicated network of state coordinators fulfills an invaluable role by coordinating with local or state emergency management agencies. More information on the AIA Disaster Assistance Program can be found online at <http://www.aia.org/about/initiatives/AIAS075269>.

The architectural community is well-positioned to offer expertise at every phase of the recovery process. When the focus shifts from emergency response to making homes livable and workplaces functional; licensed building experts—architects, engineers, builders, and others—are often called to assist in evaluating post-disaster conditions and later to help in restoring a community. There are two key areas where architects play a vital role when a disaster strikes: performing damage assessments of buildings and helping communities develop long-term recovery plans.

Damage Assessments of Buildings

One of the most immediate concerns after a disaster is the safety of the buildings that people occupy. It is critical to be able to conduct rapid damage assessments to homes, businesses, and public infrastructure to begin the process of rebuilding, and it is essential that licensed design professionals be involved to identify exactly what can be repaired and rebuilt and what must be torn down and reconstructed. Completing this process is what gets people out of emergency housing and back into their community. For instance, more than 600 AIA members volunteered to perform damage assessments and offer technical assistance to recovery efforts in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Long-Term Recovery

As a community transitions from short-term response to longer term recovery, local and state officials need to make decisions that will affect – and may even significantly alter – the built environment. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that they are made aware of the opportunities for change. Among these are comprehensive neighborhood redesign, urban redesign, landscape redesign, preservation, appreciation of little known assets, and utility relocation. The recovery process can offer the opportunity to remedy underperforming aspects of a community.

There are a number of groups and associations that offer assistance programs to address long-term planning. However, these efforts should be better coordinated between FEMA's National Response Coordination Center and the National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), which have had a strategic partnership since 2003.

We also are encouraged by the recently announced multi-agency partnership between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency on Livable Communities. We believe this approach has application in the post-disaster context as well, and we would urge FEMA to explore ways to work collaboratively with these agencies.

At the AIA, we have been providing long-term assistance through *pro bono* public service programs that offer unique opportunities to build long-term recovery strategies which are inexpensive. We have helped 143 communities through our Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team (RUDAT) programs since 1967. The RUDAT program, has included post-disaster contexts such as East Nashville, Tennessee, in 1999, and Lancaster, Texas, in 1995 following tornadoes. Similarly, through our Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) program, we have been active in over 30 communities since 2005, including several projects in New Orleans. Through these two programs, multi-disciplinary teams of professionals can provide communities with recommended changes to a city's comprehensive plan and building codes, offer suggestions on urban design issues, and educate and engage the community in a dialogue about the options available.

Key Issues and Principles in Post-Disaster Response

I would like to take a few moments to discuss some key issues and principles that my fellow architects and I have observed through the Disaster Assistance Program.

Place-Based Strategies

Building the local capacity to respond to disaster situations is at the center of our strategy. There is no national, one-size-fits-all approach to disaster response. Our programs foster local communities' ability to take responsibility and action in the wake of disaster by deploying assets that are already in place. We recognize that the most effective programs must be organized at the state level, in part because:

- Most government agencies coordinating disaster assistance and long-term reconstruction are at the state level, and AIA components can most easily connect resources through this network.
- A state component is better able to examine and discern regional patterns and trends to customize programmatic approaches and meet contextual needs.
- Most importantly, the local AIA component can most effectively marshal professional resources from nearby unaffected areas.

Therefore, the AIA's approach has focused on building a national Comprehensive Response Network of member volunteers that can deploy locally and regionally. First established in 2006, the Comprehensive Response Network currently has 52 volunteers in 39 states, the majority of whom are currently trained to coordinate local disaster response. These state coordinators have the ability to mobilize hundreds of local architects to respond to disaster situations.

This network has proven valuable in both small and large contexts. In 2008, AIA Disaster Coordinator Tom Hurd, AIA, mobilized member volunteers in Mason City, Iowa, to conduct more than 350 building assessments in the days following their historic floods. Along the Texas coast, the Texas Society of Architects and Disaster, Inc., worked to train and mobilize volunteers to conduct hundreds of damage assessments following last year's hurricanes. Our members mobilized similar efforts earlier this year in Washington State following the flood emergency there. Collectively, our network represents a unique resource to the emergency management field.

Partnerships

Today's partnerships will yield tomorrow's recovery success stories. We believe effective collaboration between emergency management agencies and professional associations should be the centerpiece of efforts moving forward. With an effective local structure in place, the disaster assistance process can swiftly and efficiently respond to a range of situations.

Currently, the AIA is working to foster a more productive relationship with the larger disaster-response community, recognizing that partnerships are fundamental to our future work. In Rhode Island, for example, the AIA is collaborating on the development of the Rhode Island Architects and Engineers Emergency Response Task Force to formally recognize and provide

licensing for volunteers to conduct damage assessments. This state-recognized network of design professionals would be trained and accredited by the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA). They also have plans to work with the state Attorney General's office to develop a set of bylaws and an activation protocol for the group. While this is an ongoing process, we are very hopeful that it will provide a model for other states to establish a more comprehensive protocol for incorporating architects and design professionals who are willing to volunteer for this work.

Similarly, AIA Louisiana recently met with representatives from the office of Governor Bobby Jindal (R) and state emergency management officials. They are interested in working with us as well as FEMA to develop a pilot program for training and licensing architects and design professionals to engage in post-disaster assessment. In California, we have continued to work with the California Emergency Management Agency (CEMA), which has a volunteer database of thousands of design professionals licensed to conduct damage assessments. In Florida, Governor Charlie Christ (R) declared March 18 Florida Architects' Day in recognition of their contributions to society, especially through disaster assistance. AIA members have also participated in a limited capacity on FEMA Mitigation Assessment Teams, most recently in Galveston, Texas, following the 2008 hurricane.

Post Disaster Housing

There are a lot of interesting and ambitious post-disaster housing ideas in the field currently that relate to post-disaster housing, and many of our members are engaged in work that addresses creative approaches to the challenge of post-disaster housing. The main principles that I believe should be used to judge them are practicality, comfort, and sustainability.

Practicality is the easy one. Emergency housing must be available quickly to people who are displaced. It is vital that FEMA has contracts and plans in place to ensure that temporary housing can be procured quickly in the event of a disaster, and in amounts that closely correspond to the need.

The level of comfort will be directly correlated with the length of time people are expected to need temporary housing. The longer the time-frame, the more comfort and greater the number of amenities that will be necessary. Proximity to shopping and employment centers may also become important considerations when relocating large numbers of displaced people.

Housing that is designed to be temporary is unsustainable by definition. It has to be reusable, and if it is reusable it must be lightweight to travel quickly and cheaply.

The AIA was pleased to work with FEMA on the Alternative Housing Pilot Project for the Gulf Coast, authorized by Congress 2006 following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But clearly more needs to be done to ensure a wide range of innovative housing strategies to meet the aforementioned goals. We urge FEMA to continue working collaboratively with HUD, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the National Institute of Building Sciences, the Joint Housing Solutions Group, and design and construction professionals to both evaluate the progress and results of the AHPP projects and to continue fostering on innovative housing solutions. We also urge FEMA to work with other stakeholders in the public and private sectors to address not just the practicality, comfort and sustainability of the housing units themselves, but also those of the larger communities in which those units are located, to avoid the “FEMA-Ville” effect of isolated, unsafe and unsustainable clusters of temporary shelter cut off from the rest of the world.

Good Samaritan Legislation

The involvement of architects in post-disaster contexts raises the related issue of the need for Good Samaritan legislation. During a disaster event, licensed architects and engineers may be exposed to questions of liability even though they are acting in good faith to preserve the safety of a community. While most states have statutes that cover certain volunteers from liability during an emergency situation, it is questionable if these statutes would shield an architect or engineer from liability if he or she is called upon to render professional services in a time of crisis. This ambiguity needs to be removed by passing federal Good Samaritan legislation.

Many states have extended immunity from liability to doctors and various other professionals who are needed during a crisis. Immunity from liability allows these professions to volunteer more readily and gives the public access to crucial services during major disasters.

Similarly, some states have recognized the importance of giving licensed architects and engineers immunity during a disaster. States ranging in size and population from

Colorado to Washington have adopted such legislation. Many, however, have not. For the public good it is important that Congress pass a federal Good Samaritan law for architects and engineers.

Speed

Last but certainly not least, post-disaster assistance needs to be implemented quickly. Although we cannot predict with any certainty when the next disaster will strike, we have seen time and again that timing is everything. The ability to get trained and licensed design professionals on the ground to perform damage assessments quickly is no less an urgent need than providing food and medicine, as getting people back into their homes lessens the need for temporary shelter and other forms of emergency provisions.

That is why it is very important that governmental agencies responsible for disaster recovery, from FEMA down to the local level, have in place the partnerships and communication plans to enable them to trigger the post-disaster response as soon as possible.

Lastly, it is important to note that all of these principles apply to all forms of disaster, natural or man-made. Whether it is a hurricane, an earthquake, an act of terrorism or a pandemic, the need to ensure that people have adequate shelter and the necessity of assessing the safety and usability of the built environment are equally great.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue. We look forward to working with the Committee to help communities prepare for, mitigate and respond to disasters, and I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.