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LIEBERMAN CRITICIZES GOP VOTES AGAINST KATRINA VICTIMS

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Thursday expressed dismay at the Committee's rejection of two proposals to improve emergency disaster aid for those who need it most: those still struggling to rebuild their lives after Hurricane Katrina.

The proposals came as amendments to comprehensive legislation unanimously reported out of Committee to reform the federal government's emergency management system and improve its disaster aid programs.

By a party line vote of 9-7, the Committee rejected one amendment that would have given the President the discretion to apply the emergency aid improvements contained in the underlying bill to Katrina victims. The second, also rejected 9-7, would have allowed the President to extend from 39 to 52 weeks the length of time victims of catastrophe could collect disaster unemployment benefits.

"One of the lessons we learned from Katrina is that federal aid was insufficient to meet the magnitude of the suffering victims endured," Lieberman said. "This legislation was inspired by the Katrina's victims, yet we are now denying more aid to those who need it the most. It only seems right that those still struggling to rebuild their lives almost a year later should benefit from this legislation."

The first amendment would have allowed for raising the caps on federal money available to Katrina victims for rental assistance; expanded FEMA's authority to provide temporary, semi-permanent, and permanent housing; helped evacuees return home; providing assistance to an entire family forced to split by the disaster; and reimbursing volunteers for housing expenses.

Lieberman noted that of the 5.8 million people living in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana when Katrina struck, more than 1 million lived below the poverty line. And a recent study found that 60 percent of evacuees had family incomes of less than \$20,000 in 2004. Almost a year after the storm, more than 200,000 in Louisiana alone are living in trailers or unfinished homes, the Senator said. Many more are living in tents in their front yards, without health care, insurance, access to decent public schools, and in many cases jobs.

Lieberman's second amendment would have allowed the President to extend unemployment benefits for victims of extreme disasters to 52 weeks. The underlying bill allows for the extension of disaster unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 39, but Lieberman said that was not enough time for people still out of work.

"The facts reflect that 39 weeks of benefits are not enough," he said. "A year after the storm hit, 82,000 Katrina survivors are still without jobs, and federal disaster unemployment benefits have been the main source of income for more them, particularly since their state benefits expired in February and March."

The underlying federal emergency management reform bill would:

- Recreate FEMA into an independent agency within the Department of Homeland Security with greater resources, more experienced leaders, and better capabilities.
- Unify DHS' scattered emergency communications efforts and provide \$3 billion in grants to state and local governments to achieve interoperable communications.
- Increase benefit caps for victims of catastrophes, extend disaster unemployment benefits, and require DHS to develop housing and recovery strategies.
- Require changes in bidding out contracts to avoid waste, fraud, and abuse.

You may read the Senator's statement for the record on the entire bill [here](http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/files/072706JILOpen.pdf) (<http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/files/072706JILOpen.pdf>).