

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2005

# LIEBERMAN SEEKS HOUSING REDRESS FOR KATRINA EVACUEES

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Thursday criticized FEMA's decisions, announced this week, to terminate payment for evacuees living in hotels and motels as of December 1, and to terminate leases for many in apartments, before seeking to ensure they will have other accommodations. Lieberman said the policy "could leave many Katrina victims homeless."

Lieberman urged top government officials to employ a "flexible" approach to solving the housing problems of hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast evacuees now facing new deadlines for finding their own shelter.

In a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Acting FEMA Director David Paulison, Lieberman said recent FEMA actions had "sown confusion, created fear, and increased stress" for thousands of displaced people and he urged FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security to reconsider its recent decisions.

"The unprecedented nature of this natural disaster requires that FEMA do everything possible to act with humaneness, effectiveness, and fairness to provide decent transitional living conditions for the hundreds of thousands of hurricane victims," Lieberman wrote. "Unfortunately, FEMA's current approach to housing does not appear to meet that test."

Following is Lieberman's letter:

November 18, 2005

The Honorable Michael Chertoff  
Secretary  
Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

The Honorable R. David Paulison  
Acting Director  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C. St. S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Secretary Chertoff & Chief Paulison:

As you know, since being evacuated from their homes and communities, hundreds of thousands of Hurricane Katrina survivors have faced a series of challenges in stabilizing and rebuilding their lives. While I know FEMA is working hard to assist families to meet many of their needs, recent actions by FEMA regarding existing housing programs have sown confusion, created fear, and increased stress for thousands of evacuees who are relying on FEMA for support. I urge you to reconsider these decisions.

In particular, FEMA's decision to terminate support for evacuees still living in hotels and motels, as well as leases for many in apartments, before seeking to ensure they will have other accommodations could leave many Katrina victims homeless. The same is true of FEMA's refusal to implement a more flexible policy for some evacuees using the Transitional Assistance Housing Program who may lose assistance because FEMA failed to inform them, in a timely manner, of important conditions in the program.

On November 15, 2005, FEMA announced that as of December 1, it will terminate the short-term housing program for evacuees currently housed in hotels and motels. In that same announcement, FEMA noted that it is executing "an aggressive plan" to help the 150,000 evacuees currently living in 53,000 hotel and motel rooms find other long-term housing solutions. However, FEMA acknowledges that it will not be able to reach each individual to ensure that he or she successfully resettles into a new home. This "aggressive plan" apparently consists largely of posting flyers outlining this new policy and urging evacuees to call the FEMA 1-800 number for help. These actions are far from adequate and appear to show little understanding of the dire situation many of these families face. Furthermore, two weeks in many instances is not enough time for evacuees to both find an apartment and sign a new lease. I urge you to develop a comprehensive housing counseling program conducted by trained

professionals to assist every evacuee successfully move from short-term to long-term housing and to readjust your December 1 deadline to ensure time for this program to be implemented.

FEMA also announced that it will not honor state and local-sponsored sheltering in apartments through the Section 403 program past March 1. This is an abrupt change from September, when FEMA notified states and local governments that FEMA would cover the rental expenses for leases they signed to provide apartments to evacuees for up to 12 months. This week's announcement changes the rules and housing expectations for state and local governments, landlords and evacuees and has created considerable confusion. The result is that some evacuees now living in apartments may be left without stable housing if FEMA is unable to successfully transition them into the Section 408 Transitional Assistance Housing Program by March 1. In addition, I have been notified by the Connecticut Department of Social Services, who is administering the Section 403 program that landlords are now refusing to rent to evacuees due to a lack of assurance from FEMA that it will cover evacuees' expenses after March 1. This deadline has added another level of disorder and uncertainty to an already stressful situation for evacuees.

Finally, I am concerned about FEMA's treatment of evacuees who may not have received sufficient instruction about the Section 408 Transitional Assistance Housing Program. As I understand it, under this program, over 500,000 families who have registered with FEMA and whose house was destroyed or made uninhabitable received a lump sum check for \$2,358 to cover three months of rent. Participants may extend this assistance for up to 18 months if they remain eligible and can demonstrate that these funds were used solely for rental needs. This program can be an effective tool for securing longer-term housing for Katrina evacuees. However, in discussions with my staff, FEMA personnel acknowledged that some families who received this housing assistance may not have been first informed that using the money for anything other than rent (for example other essential needs such as food, medicine or clothing) would make them ineligible for the 18-month extension. As a result, evacuees who used some of the funds for other essential needs may be barred from receiving this extended housing benefit.

It is imperative that FEMA apply some flexibility to this rule and allow evacuees in need of housing assistance to continue to participate in the program if, for example, they used the housing funds for other essential needs because they were unaware of the program's restrictions. FEMA would not need to incur additional costs because it could deduct the funds from the \$26,200 maximum possible aid for personal property and housing assistance available to families

through the Individual and Households Program (IHP). However, a flexible approach would help families who, through no fault of their own, may have used funds intended for housing for other essential needs.

I support FEMA's decision to transition evacuees currently in government-financed apartment rentals, hotels and motels into the Section 408 Transitional Assistance Housing Program. However, evacuees should be able to count on the Section 403 housing program until they have successfully transitioned into the Section 408 program. The unprecedented nature of this natural disaster requires that FEMA do everything possible to act with humaneness, effectiveness, and fairness to provide decent transitional living conditions for the hundreds of thousands of hurricane victims. Unfortunately, FEMA's current approach to housing does not appear to meet that test.

I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman  
Ranking Minority Member