



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NEW FEDERAL DISASTER GUIDELINES BUILD ON SUPERSTORM SANDY LESSONS TO ENSURE RECOVERY EFFORTS MEET THE NEEDS OF MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Landmark settlement between Latino Action Network, NAACP, Fair Share Housing Center and the State of New Jersey cited as a model

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The federal government has issued important new guidelines designed to ensure that federally funded disaster recovery efforts meet the needs and protect the civil rights of minority communities.

The guidelines will be almost immediately put to their first test in the response to Louisiana's current catastrophic flooding. The guidelines build off of a landmark federal civil rights settlement that the Fair Share Housing Center, the New Jersey NAACP and the Latino Action Network signed with the State of New Jersey in 2014. That settlement remedied serious problems with the Christie administration's Superstorm Sandy recovery efforts that threatened to leave thousands of low-income and minority families behind in the rebuilding process.

"The federal government is taking the lessons learned from Superstorm Sandy to ensure that low-income families and minority communities' rights are protected after a disaster," said Kevin Walsh, Executive Director of the Fair Share Housing Center. "No one should ever be denied help in rebuilding because of the color of their skin, the neighborhood they live in or the fact that they don't speak English as a first language. With severe storms like Sandy becoming more common, it's important that every family gets access to the help they need. These guidelines set clear expectations that states and local governments have to proactively plan to make sure the needs of every community impacted by a disaster, including African-American and Latino communities too often overlooked in disaster recovery."

The guidelines – issued last week by the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services and Transportation – apply federal civil rights laws to state and local governments that receive federal funding to recover from disasters.

The guidance notes that "while emergencies and disasters affect all people, the ability of communities of color to access critical recovery programs, activities, and services often has been hampered." It cites several instances following recent disasters where minority residents were discriminated against.

The federal guidelines focus on five key areas:

- **Reaffirm Commitment to Nondiscrimination Protections.** State and local governments should ensure they have clear non-discrimination policies in place in the event of a natural disaster.

These policies should be clearly posted. Governments should also have a central point of contact to whom residents can submit complaints.

- **Engage with and Include Diverse Racial, Ethnic, and Limited English Proficient Populations.** Government officials should directly engaged with minority communities so that they understand the programs that are available to them. These communities should also be included in disaster-planning efforts. Outreach should involve contacts with community leaders, faith-based organizations and ethnic media outlets.
- **Provide meaningful access to individuals with limited English proficiency.** Government agencies should include all materials in multiple language and provide translation and interpretation services so residents who do not speak English can participate in disaster relief programs.
- **Include immigrant communities in preparedness, response, mitigation and recovery efforts.** Noting that immigrant communities may be reluctant to take advantage of federally funded disaster programs, the guidelines remind state and local governments that they should work closely with these groups regardless of immigration status.
- **Collect and analyze data.** State and local governments should collect data that assess the needs of minority communities and use that information in their disaster response planning.

The guidance specifically cites the landmark agreement between the Latino Action Network, NAACP, Fair Share Housing Center, and the State of New Jersey designed to fix major flaws in the state's Sandy recovery programs that caused black and Latino families to be improperly denied federally funded assistance.

That settlement requires the Christie administration to provide \$240 million in direct housing assistance to low-income households to ensure that storm-damaged communities are rebuilt in ways that expand opportunities for working families, seniors and those with disabilities. The settlement also required the state to re-evaluate aid applications that had been improperly denied and to adopt a comprehensive outreach plan to reach New Jersey residents who are not proficient in English.

"Our experience shows that Latino and other minority communities often face significant barriers — including language barriers — preventing them from taking advantage of disaster recovery programs," said Christian Estevez, President of the Latino Action Network. "We applaud the federal government's work to ensure that our approach to disaster recovery becomes a national model and particularly appreciate the attention the federal government is paying to residents who do not speak English."

"We fought hard to ensure that low-income communities and families of color would have the same opportunity as everyone else to obtain access to federal assistance that can help them rebuild their lives," said Mike McNeil, Housing Chair for the New Jersey NAACP. "We are pleased that the approach we pioneered for equitable rebuilding after a major disaster is being promoted across the country."

In addition to Fair Share Housing Center, a number of national organizations issued a joint statement on the guidelines today, including: the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, the Mississippi

Center of Justice, Texas Appleseed, the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center and the National Fair Housing Alliance.

The statement reads:

"We welcome the new federal guidance from the U.S. Department of Justice reinforcing the existing civil rights protections in federal disaster response and recovery programs that are intended to ensure communities of color are not left behind in disaster planning, response and recovery. With the tragic flooding in Louisiana and the ever-increasing number of disasters across the country, we look to these new guidelines to help ensure equitable and effective recovery efforts.

"Our organizations worked closely with the federal government to implement the lessons we learned in federal disaster responses from Hurricane Katrina to Hurricane Ike and Superstorm Sandy to ensure that future disaster recovery efforts treat all families and communities fairly and equitably.

"We believe these guidelines are an important step toward ensuring that federal recovery money is spent in the way it was intended, to meet the needs of all communities. This guidance reaffirms our highest ideals as a country that no one should be denied the opportunity to rebuild after a natural disaster because of the color of their skin or their national origin. We look forward to working with federal, state and local governments to ensure that these guidelines are properly implemented at all levels to rebuild strong and resilient communities."

You can read a copy of the new federal guidelines [here](#).

You can find more information about the landmark agreement between the Latino Action Network, NAACP, Fair Share Housing Center, and the State of New Jersey [here](#).

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