



**U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)  
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)  
Listening Session Recap  
April 24, Bonita Springs**

## **I. Introduction**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hosted this listening session, which was held in Bonita Springs, FL. In attendance were representatives of non-governmental organizations, service providers, community members, and government partners. Introductory speakers included:

- Cameron Quinn, DHS Officer for CRCL
- Linda Mastandrea, Director, FEMA Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC)
- James Montgomery, Unit Chief, FEMA Civil Rights Program, FEMA Office of Equal Rights
- Regis Phelan, Acting Director, FEMA Office of Equal Rights
- Larissa Browne, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Anna Hinken, DHS CRCL, Moderator

The listening session began with Larissa Browne welcoming attendees and reviewing housekeeping rules for the session. Ms. Browne introduced Officer Quinn who explained the purpose of the meeting. Officer Quinn explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear about concerns and experiences related to the impact of the disaster had on individuals with disabilities and the surrounding areas. She asked that participants also share “what worked,” or effective practices. By better understanding these experiences, and in partnership with the state and local entities, including non-profit organizations, she noted that we can do more to improve preparedness, response, and recovery for persons with disabilities in time for the next hurricane season and other disasters.

Prior to opening up the session for participants to make comments, Ms. Mastandrea and Mr. Phelan each provided a brief overview of the activities of their respective offices with regard to individuals with disabilities and disaster-related activities.

## II. Issues/concerns and Effective Practices Noted

### A. Communication Access for People with Disabilities

- **The Government<sup>1</sup> Should Improve Communication with Communities about Preparedness and Sheltering** - An official from the Agency of Aging for Southwest Florida told us that individuals need encouragement to register on the special needs calling number, especially individuals who live alone. Households also need to have portable chargers for cellphones on hand and more than three days' worth of supplies. She went on to say that this type of messaging should be promoted as Public Service Announcements that focus on telling everyone to be prepared for any kind of disaster. Other messaging that needs to be disseminated includes information on what shelters are open. She indicated that during the hurricane people were not sure which shelters were open and there was confusion.
- **Media Outlets should Provide Access to Emergency Messages to Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing** – The representative from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center commented about the scroll that media outlets provide on the bottom of a screen, specifically if there are captions, the scroll will cover it. The representative recommended that live captioning should be provided if there is an emergency and that the captioning should not be moved because people that do not know sign language will have to read it.

### B. Preparedness and Evacuation

- **Governments Should Review its Use of Registries**– A county official told us that the registries in Lee County are for people whose health would decompensate in a regular shelter and for people who don't have transportation. The official continued to tell us that they have outreach events every year to increase the number of people on the registry and

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<sup>1</sup> The Government" or "Governments" as used in this document refers to federal, state, or local governments, depending upon which of these entities has a role or responsibilities in the area described.

that this year, because the past storm was “scary,” the registry doubled in size.

### **C. Sheltering**

- **Community Member Experience: Sheltering Considerations and other Supports to Maintain Independence** - A community member shared her story about sheltering. She said she has never felt so let down by her community. During the storm, she explained that she could not go to a shelter because Lee County told her she must have a companion caregiver accompany her during her stay. The community member stated that she is single and doesn't have anybody to sit in a shelter with her. She went on to explain that an area agency arranged for her to go to a nursing home but the nursing home did not accept her because of the medications she takes. Instead she was taken to a mental health crisis unit that did not allow her service dog to stay with her, and since she did not have her service dog, she was confined to her wheelchair. When the storm passed, the mental health unit would not let her leave until someone could confirm that she had electricity and running water at her home. She finally got home but because of the storm there were no service providers so she had no one to go grocery shopping and she has no food at home. She further commented that people with disabilities should be able to go to a general shelter and have their needs met, and should not have to go to a “special needs” shelter.
  
- **Shelter Providers Should Ensure Sufficient Staffing** - The Lee County official told us they have limited staff for shelters and that is why individuals with disabilities are asked to bring a caregiver. Also, the Health Department opened the “special needs” shelter. The county is trying to add additional volunteers for all shelters. The Salvation Army representative added that during last year's storm, many volunteers were up North since they are snowbirds and that is why there were was a shortage of volunteers at the shelters.
  
- **Shelter Providers Should Improve Conditions for Individuals with Alzheimer's and Provide Training to Shelter Personnel** - A community member affiliated with the Alzheimer's Support Network told us that they had reports of people afflicted with Alzheimer's who were taken to shelters and had a lot of challenges. People afflicted with

Alzheimer's need a private area because there is a lot of confusion and noise in a shelter and this heightens their situation. Volunteers at shelters, the police and even nurses who deal with Alzheimer's patients need training to make them aware of the challenges of dealing with Alzheimer's. He suggested that even a minimal amount of training would help.

- **The Red Cross and other Shelter Providers Need to Improve Communication about Sheltering Requirements** - A community member told us about her experience checking into a shelter with a daughter with functional needs and an elderly father. According to the community member, the shelter requested her identification even though it was her understanding that she would not be asked for identification to access a shelter. The paperwork and the requirement to provide identification created quite a bottleneck of people trying to get into the shelter. She told us that the officers on duty at the shelter were good but volunteers may need some training on how to handle checking people into a shelter.
  - A Red Cross representative clarified that identification was used to determine if people would need additional services after the storm had passed. No one would have been denied services or denied entry into a shelter if they did not have identification.
- **The Government and Shelter Providers Should Consider the Location of Shelters and Transportation Needs** - Another community member told us about her experiences going to a shelter with her son who has a disability. She said she was able to get into a nearby shelter instead of one that was very far away. People who went to the other shelters had transportation challenges getting there and most had disabilities.
- **The Government and Shelter Providers Should Consider the presence of Visitors from Out of State** - A law enforcement officer from a different Florida county talked about the increase in the number of people who came to the shelters in his county. He explained that the family members of residents visiting Florida could not get flights out of the state and also had to seek shelter.

- **The Government Should Review Caregiver Requirements at Shelters** - Two community members who had children with disabilities talked about what would happen to their children when they were no longer around. They were concerned that their children might not have caregivers when they had to evacuate to a shelter and because of this would be not admitted.
- **The Government Needs to Ensure Accessibility of “Host” Shelters** A Red Cross representative talked about one of the “host” shelters that had been “designated by the federal government” in a nearby town. The “host” shelters are used after the storm has passed. One of the “host” shelters was located at a church and the church had no ramp for a wheelchair. One of the people that was trying to access the shelter was a double amputee in an electric wheelchair and there was no way he was getting in because there were three steps. The pastor built a ramp for his wheelchair and he was able to access the shelter. The Red Cross representative added that the government entity that had selected this shelter should have made sure all needs could be met.
- **Shelter Providers Should Ensure they have Sign Language Interpreters** - A representative from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center commented that FEMA and Lee County had sign language interpreters but that Collier County did not do a good job having sign language interpreters at shelters.

#### **D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs**

- **FEMA Should Clearly Communicate its Application and Appeals Process** - A Salvation Army representative told us about the Disaster Recovery Centers that were opened in Collier County and that they had FEMA and Small Business Administration (SBA) representatives and others giving out information. She understood that FEMA had a hard task to manage with the storm; however, people would complain that after the initial application process, FEMA did not educate them on the next steps. Another representative talked about making sure people have information about the FEMA appeals process. Another representative mentioned that it would be helpful if FEMA could notify people by phone about the status of their request for assistance.

- **FEMA Should Consider Various Factors in Advance of Setting up Disaster Recovery Centers** - Another representative mentioned that the FEMA Disaster Recovery Center was set up in inconvenient and far off location that was not on a bus route and difficult to access even if you had a car. Pre-planning should go into selecting the location of the center.
- **FEMA Should Consider the Use of Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) Funding for Sheltering** - A Lee County official commented that she would like FEMA to reconsider whether Hazard Mitigation Grants can be used directly for sheltering. Lee County has the opportunity to use up to \$24 million dollars in hazard mitigation grant funding, however none of that funding can be used for sheltering. The official went on to explain that Lee County has a high population of people with disabilities that need additional space at shelters, for example, quiet spaces for people with Alzheimer's and space for service dogs. It is not easy to fund improvements for shelters and it would be helpful to be able to use HMGP funds for shelters and shelter improvements.
- **FEMA Should Ensure Affected Communities Do Not Experience Significant Delays Reaching FEMA Call Centers** - A representative from Project Hope told us that she hears from survivors that there is a lack of response from FEMA and a lack of ability to get through to FEMA on the phone. For example, some people wait over seven hours to be connected to a FEMA person.

## **E. Services and Supports for Recovery**

- **Governments Should Ensure the Needs of People with Limited English Proficiency are Met During Recovery** - A Salvation Army representative remarked that Immokalee County had a challenge in the recovery process because some of the people affected by the hurricane did not understand the process due to limited English proficiency. The representative reported that the ability to have more interpreters (Spanish) to help with the registration process would be very helpful. According to the representative, Immokalee is a farming community where limited English comprehension is a barrier and Creole and Spanish are the most commonly languages spoken. A community member also told us that in Immokalee, people were living on lawn

chairs in parking lots because their mobile homes had been destroyed. Eventually they have moved back to their trailer homes but without roofs.

- **Governments Should Ensure Repairs to Roofs and Homes Are Included in Disaster Recovery** - The Catholic Charities representative talked about the shortage of roofing supplies in Florida and the coming together of a number of organizations from various locations who came south to help repair roofs and homes. The Mennonites providing skilled laborers would face challenges in finding space to park their RVs once they arrived in southern Florida. The representative commented that Lee County told them “you can’t park there by code” and so this was an issue. The representative indicated that the disaster recovery plan is behind in rebuilding this part of southwest Florida and codes need to be reconsidered.
  - One organization told us many people are still waiting for estimates for repairs to their homes. There is a labor shortage even for someone to move a tree that fell on their home. The emphasis is on building new homes.

### **III. Conclusion**

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for sharing stories, concerns and best practices and encouraged people to reach out after this meeting if they have additional concerns or questions that were not brought up during the session.