



**US Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)
Listening Session Recap, Orlando, FL
April 23, 2018**

I. Introduction

The Engelwood Neighborhood Center, City of Orlando hosted this listening session. 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
- Alexandra Temes, Engelwood Neighborhood Center Manager
- Anna Hinken, DHS CRCL, Moderator

The listening session began with Ms. Temes welcoming everyone and reviewing housekeeping rules for the session. Afterwards, Officer Quinn 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, Officer Quinn introduced Ms. Linda Mastandrea, Mr. Regis Phelan and Mr. James Montgomery. 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 Government¹ Should Improve Communication With People Who Are Deaf and Hearing Impaired** - The Center for Independent Living representative reported that a lot of work has been done to get the elderly and people with disabilities to move to shelters, but more has to been done with the deaf and hearing impaired. The representative told us that Orange County just started a text service for 911 and maybe some variation with a video operating system could be used, for example, having an app that can potentially be downloaded to an iPad would be helpful. According to the representative, funding would be needed to develop this type of app.

B. Preparedness and Evacuation

- **Governments Should Proactively Integrate People with Disabilities within Emergency Planning and Preparedness Efforts** -- A woman who was in Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria struck told us about the importance of being prepared. For example, when the power went off in Puerto Rico, it was important to have a landline because they work, but people have to be educated so they know to have a landline. Additionally,, people who needed dialysis had a hard time getting it due to the power being out. Education and preparedness are important.
- **Governments and FEMA Should Improve Social Media Strategies to Ensure Accurate Information about Evacuation and Preparedness is Disseminated** -- An organization representative suggested that a lot more information should be shared through social media by official sources to counter inaccurate information that is out there. For example, information about shelters (including for people with

¹ 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.

disabilities), evacuation routes, and information on phone numbers that deaf people can call should all be on social media.

- **Governments Should Review the Effectiveness of its Registries and Messaging about Preparedness** -- The City of Orlando emergency manager told us that Orange County has a registry and they encourage people with disabilities to register. People hesitate to do so and often wait until the last minute. Registries are helpful because when the county hears about a storm brewing in the Caribbean, the Health Department will reach out to people on the registry via phone to ask if they will need assistance or transportation to a shelter. However, people will hear that a storm is still 96 hours away and will back out of evacuating. That official added that FEMA provides a wealth of information that the city of Orlando pushes out to homeowners' associations, non-profits, and faith based organizations. The official pointed out that since the two storms from last year, they have people's attention and should continue to push out information on preparedness.

- **Governments Should Work Collaboratively with Local Agencies, Non-Profits, and Businesses to Enhance Preparedness Planning** -- The Second Harvest representative told us that a couple of years ago they started an initiative, called Table 60, with some of the agencies that serve seniors. It is called Table 60, because identifying people who are 60 and older is one of the most difficult things to do since there are confidentiality issues. The representative commented that it would be a good idea for the top staff of the food bank to meet with the county and city to talk about registration and if there is a waiver that would need to be signed to provide food drops at certain locations, to make sure people are being served during a storm.

- **Governments Should Work with Agencies Who Assist the Homeless** - An organization representative told us that one of the things that Orlando has done is partnered with agencies for the homeless and homeless shelter networks in order to get to homeless people who live in camp areas to move before a storm hits.

- **Governments Should Improve Access to its Information for Seniors and Provide Alternatives for those who Do Not Have Access to the Internet** - A community representative with AARP told us that we have

to be cognizant that Florida is a “senior state” and a lot of seniors are not on the web. They don’t have smartphones and so communicating with them is difficult. She went on to say that we need to remember that when power goes out in a senior apartment complex and stays out for seven days, seniors have no food and they can't eat anything in the refrigerator. She said that while there are shelters and places to get help, seniors would have to stand in long lines to get food. Most seniors or people with disabilities could not get the help they needed so they went hungry. Communication is a major issue since most seniors are by themselves. During last year’s hurricane, the community leader had checked in with only four apartment complexes and found devastation and seniors who didn't know what to do.

- **Effective Practice: Local Law Enforcement Collaboration with Communities on Preparedness** - A community member said he wanted to applaud law enforcement, the police departments, and the fire departments, that all rallied and found solutions. The key is to collaborate with law enforcement to address some of those needs that arise because of the storm and possibly have a registry where people can sign up as they do for the disability shelters, and a registry for those who need food in case of an emergency.
- **Effective Practice: Response at Orlando Airport** -- The representative from Second Harvest Food Bank talked about the collaboration that occurred at the Orlando Airport after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. The United Way convened a meeting with many organizations with almost a hundred people in attendance. As a result of the meeting, there was a multi-resource center established at the airport for the Puerto Ricans who started arriving; it was an excellent response. The city of Orlando, the county, the United Way, and other organizations all came together and put their best work forward.

C. Sheltering

- **Governments Should Work Collaboratively with Non-Profits to Improve Communication and Outreach Related to the Benefits of Shelters During a Disaster** - The Center for Independent Living representative reported that people with disabilities are afraid of going to shelters because they anticipate a lack of support and they end up waiting too long to get to a shelter. The Center is trying to keep the

conversation focused on the benefits of shelters. Once a person has gone once to a shelter, they are likely to return for the next hurricane.

D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs

- **FEMA Should Address the Continued Housing Needs of Hurricane Maria Survivors** - A staffer from a Senator's office told us that they have been getting inquiries about FEMA. People have been showing up without appointments or calling to get information on where to find lodging for individuals who relocated from Puerto Rico. FEMA told people that they will be out on the street since FEMA will stop paying for hotels. As a result, the congressional office is being inundated with calls. The staffer went on to say that FEMA has to look for a long-term solution because people are not going to go back to Puerto Rico as long as there is no power. The Orlando housing problem, according to the staffer, should be a priority especially for people with disabilities.
- **FEMA Should Regularly Update Contact Information Released to the Public** - A staffer from a Congressional office told us that during the hurricane season, they receive a large volume of calls from constituents related to FEMA problems. The Congressional office had some FEMA numbers to call to get information but did not have FEMA phone numbers related to people with disabilities. It would be helpful if the communities were provided the right numbers to call in the first place before hurricane season starts again.
- **FEMA Should Regularly Update and Communicate Information on FEMA Resources and Eligibility** - The Orlando Emergency Manager referred to the FEMA related questions that came up at the multi-resource center at the airport. He told us there was a lot of confusion about FEMA resources and who was eligible for FEMA programs. The FEMA staff that was at the airport tried to find the answers but did not have all the information necessary to provide answers. Around 34,000 people from Puerto Rico went through the center at the airport and it was a model that can be used for other events locally.
- **FEMA Should Ensure Timely Information is Provided to Puerto Rican Survivors Who Evacuated from Puerto Rico** - One community

representative asked about the confusion surrounding housing for Puerto Rican survivors who have relocated to the Orlando area. There is confusion on who will help, whether it's FEMA or the state. For example, regarding assistance with housing, FEMA had told survivors it would end Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) the week before the meeting so people slept in their cars before it was announced that TSA would be reinstated. Mr. Phelan from FEMA told the audience that providing temporary housing is difficult normally and after a state makes a request there are eligibility issues that are associated with federal dollars but you also need availability of housing. In this case, FEMA had to set up a transitional sheltering program that might go for 30 to 90 days and then the state has to come back and ask for an extension. FEMA does not want to set up FEMA trailer parks because that is very expensive. There are no easy answers so it's become an ongoing dynamic process to try to find a temporary solution that may or may not turn into a long-term solution.

- **Effective Practice: FEMA Distribution Centers** - A community member said she gave FEMA a thumbs up because of FEMA's great job with the distribution centers during the storm. The Congressional staffers agreed with this statement.

E. Services and Supports for Recovery

- **Governments Should Improve Access to Food Stamps after a Disaster** - One community member told us about people from Puerto Rico wanting to apply for food stamps in Florida who faced challenges because they lived in hotels and didn't have permanent addresses. As a hotel does not accept mail, they can't apply because of a lack of an address. According to the community member, the program should provide food stamps for a month or two without having to include a permanent address on an application, until things stabilize for people.
- **Governments, FEMA, Local Businesses Should Work Collaboratively to Ensure Disaster Survivors Have Access to Housing** - One organization representative told us that people who don't have the best housing situation (e.g., pre-disaster housing was in poor condition, needed repairs, etc.) or without adequate or permanent housing before a hurricane take a long time to recover. Often these people move from shelter to shelter when one closes (even given

transportation issues getting to shelters). There is a shortage of affordable housing in the Orlando area making recovery even more difficult.

III. Conclusion

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for the dialogue and encourage everyone to continue to share feedback, concerns, and best practices with all of us.