

Super Storm Sandy Recovery
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Senator Robert Menendez
Housing Subcommittee – March 12, 2014

“This hearing will come to order. I am pleased to welcome our two panels this morning, and to have the chance to hear from the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Shaun Donovan. Welcome, Mr. Secretary.

“Today’s hearing will focus on the ongoing and often unmet needs of the people devastated by Super Storm Sandy. It has now been almost a year and a half since the storm made landfall on the New Jersey coast, and wreaked havoc throughout the region. Since the storm, the people of New Jersey and the other affected states have worked hard to rebuild.

“But for too many, the recovery is not as far along as it should be. And too many families are frustrated with the administration of some of the disaster funds meant to help them rebuild from this tragic storm.

“With grantees now preparing Action Plans for the second round of Community Development Block Grant Disaster funding, we are at a critical moment. Clearly, we need to consider lessons learned from the last round, so states don’t make the same mistakes in the second round. It’s my hope that we will avoid repeating the same problems that, frankly, never should have happened in the first place.

“When the storm struck, and we began to secure the necessary funding and assistance, I confess that I thought it was a good idea to give states the flexibility and discretion that seemed reasonable, assuming we would all rise to the occasion. Now, frankly, I question the wisdom of that assumption.

“I say this because, for the last year and a half I have heard story after story – from family after family – business owners, homeowners, renters, local officials – I’ve heard from constituents at roundtables, through emails and heart-wrenching telephone calls to my office – about their shared experiences that have led us here today. I’ve heard of paperwork being lost, the lack of clear criteria for awarding assistance -- people have been left waiting...and waiting...and waiting for permission to start rebuilding.

“There has been confusion about how to apply for state-run programs. There’s been a clear lack of transparency about the status of applications; incorrect denials of funding; and lack of transparency about the reasons for denial, and how applicants can appeal those denials. There have also been reported problems with the Spanish language website, and allegations that minorities are being rejected at disproportionately high rates.

“People simply feel the major state programs are not being run fairly or competently. And from what I have heard, I am inclined to say they have cause for concern. Bottom line: some have chosen to point the blame at the federal government, but I say that it is time to stop finger pointing and get the job done.

“We need solutions not more of the same blame game that has led to delay after delay in helping the people of my state, and other states, recover. We need greater transparency, clear standards, and responsibility and accountability. These are not too much to ask.

“Let me be clear. This is now the third hearing this Subcommittee has held on Sandy recovery, and I will hold 100 more if that will help us get the answers we need and get it right for the people whose lives have been devastated by the storm.

“Today, Mr. Secretary, we need answers for the people of my state and every state that suffered extraordinary damage. We need to understand how we can improve the recovery process for those who still desperately need it. We want to be clear about what’s working well and how we build on those successes... as well as what’s going wrong and where the delays are in order to fix the problems quickly and effectively.

“Mr. Secretary, with all due respect, as I said in a letter I wrote to you, *‘overall, I hold HUD responsible for taking the leadership role to ensure proper implementation of best practices, including recommendations of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force’s Rebuilding Strategy report. It is my view that HUD must ensure that the state is more transparent, more equitable, and speedier in the distribution of crucial funds.’*

“I thank you for being here, and I look forward to your cooperation in this effort.”

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