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FEMA SUED FOR DENYING ASSISTANCE TO THE POOR

Hurricane Victims Being Denied Aid in Recovery Efforts

WESLACO, Texas – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is being sued for denying disaster aid to victims of Hurricane Dolly by failing to use consistent standards for providing housing repair assistance.

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA), the leading provider of legal aid in Texas, filed the lawsuit on behalf of La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) and fourteen low-income Texans who were denied FEMA benefits because of the conditions of their homes prior to the disaster. The only explanation the residents received for their denials was that their homes suffered “insufficient damage.”

According to the lawsuit, it is FEMA’s policy to deny housing repair assistance to homes that were in substandard condition before the storm because any damage during the disaster was caused by the quality of the home. This approach to disaster aid prevents low-income families from receiving assistance that they qualify for and need for their health and safety.

“Many low-income families have built and maintained their homes using the few resources they have,” said TRLA attorney Jerome Wesevich. “Their homes may not have been perfect before the hurricane, but that does not make them any less deserving of aid than a wealthy family.”

After hurricanes Dolly and Ike devastated coastal areas this summer, thousands of Texas families applied for federal aid to rebuild their lives and repair their homes. In the Rio Grande Valley more than 38,000 families have applied for FEMA assistance after Hurricane Dolly. Approximately half of those families have had their applications denied.

Among the individuals in the lawsuit is Jose Gonzalez, a quadriplegic who has lived in his Harlingen home for twenty years. Winds from Hurricane Dolly caused damage to his roof and, as a result, mold has begun to grow inside his house. Gonzalez’s application for aid and his request for a re-inspection of his home have been denied without explanation. He does not have the financial resources necessary to fix his home without federal assistance.

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“FEMA cannot deny assistance to disaster victims just because they are poor,” added Wesevich. “If anything, these families need the government’s help the most.”

The lawsuit marks the third time that TRLA has sued FEMA for its policies while providing disaster relief assistance. A copy of the lawsuit can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/trlafema3> .

Established in 1970, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc. (TRLA) is a nonprofit organization that provides free legal services to low-income and disadvantaged clients in a 68-county service area. TRLA’s mission is to promote the dignity, self-sufficiency, safety and stability of low-income Texas residents by providing high-quality legal assistance and related educational services.

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