

Office of the Commissioner
State of Louisiana
Division of Administration

JOHN BEL EDWARDS
GOVERNOR



JAY DARDENNE
COMMISSIONER OF ADMINISTRATION

January 19, 2018

The Honorable Garret Graves
Member of Congress
House of Representatives
430 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-1806

Dear Congressman Graves:

Thank you for your letter dated January 3, 2018, in which you commented on the progress of the *Restore Louisiana Homeowner Assistance* program. Let me first extend appreciation to you and other members of our Congressional delegation for your leadership and hard work in securing much needed federal funds to support our recovery efforts from the March and August 2016 floods that impacted tens of thousands across our state. In addition, your recent work with Congressman Richmond to eliminate the federal ruling that a SBA loan be considered a duplication of benefit will be a huge relief to up to 15,000 Louisiana families who did qualify for this assistance if it is enacted. As you know, Governor Edwards and the Office of Community Development have been advocating for this change and we are pleased to see the recent progress made on this topic.

As you know, the Restore Louisiana Homeowner Assistance Program is moving faster than any long-term recovery program in the history of our country, but we agree with you – it isn't fast enough. We moved at a record pace through the federally required steps for creating an action plan for how the state would use the appropriated dollars, and went through the mandatory public comment period, before HUD ultimately approved our recovery plan. As such, funds finally were made available to us in April 2017, a full year after the March floods and 8 months after the August floods. We quickly launched our program and have outpaced previous disasters in getting funding in the hands of disaster victims for their home rebuilding and repair. These rebuilding programs comply with all federal regulations and we constantly balance the need for compliance and speed. At the same time, we continue to work with Congress and our federal partners, such as HUD, to find ways to streamline the processes where practical and allowable.

You particularly noted the continued challenge imposed on the State and our citizens who are participating in the FEMA Direct Housing program and have been provided MHUs rent-free. Let me first assure you that the Restore Louisiana Program launched efforts in early July 2017 to work proactively with FEMA to provide a clear understanding of Restore Louisiana's program policies and process as it pertains to the MHU population. In addition, while our program was inviting homeowners to complete the formal application based on program phases, with a focus on processing our most vulnerable population first, we

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leaned forward and invited all applicants who were participating in FEMA's MHU program to submit their formal applications before the end of October. In addition, Restore Louisiana created a special team of experienced case managers to prioritize assistance for these applicants, specifically focusing on the completion of damage assessments (and lead, if required), as well as eligibility review, in order to expedite processing through the program. As of early January, an estimated 2,600 homeowners in our program (of approximately 47,000 who have completed the program survey) were assigned a FEMA MHU. More than 1,900 (70%) have completed their application and are being assisted by the program as quickly as possible.

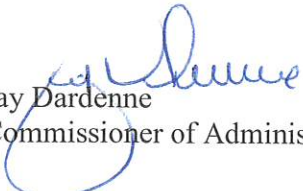
A primary issue remaining is effectively coordinating the timelines and requirements of assistance among federal funding agencies. FEMA's decision to deny the State's request for an extension to its self-imposed deadline of 18 months of rent-free MHUs from the date of disaster does not take into account the time required for the State (1) to receive HUD long-term recovery funds, (2) meet federal requirements such as environmental reviews, (3) verify the required eligibility and duplication of benefits for each applicant, (4) ensure these funds are spent on only eligible activities in accordance with HUD guidance, and (5) make certain that homeowners are able to secure services to complete their repairs (when they choose to manage their own construction). An intervention at the federal level to remove unreasonable timelines in legislation before it reaches the program level would provide relief for the unnecessary stress and strain on impacted homeowners, as well as on the efficient operations of program to avoid costly and time-consuming adjustments. You should know that GOHSEP is negotiating specific extensions of the rent-free period for certain MHU residents, including the Restore Louisiana applicants. We will keep you updated on the progress on this front and welcome any assistance you can provide to the effort.

One additional note on the FEMA MHU population is that the State has also worked closely with FEMA on those households occupying FEMA MHUs who were renters at the time of the storm and have lost their rental unit. The State (through OCD and LHC) has issued Rapid Rehousing Assistance to approximately 158 households receiving FEMA direct housing assistance. Multiple Housing Fairs were held in November and December for eligible households to be able to complete the application process, connect with a service provider and meet landlords with available units.

Please be assured that the State and the Restore Louisiana Program will continue to assist the FEMA MHU population at each step of the process to help them get back home as quickly as possible. We appreciate your continued support for the full funding needed to complete efforts to rebuild in the Restore Louisiana Program as well as other recovery programs.

With best regards, I am

Very truly yours,


Jay Dardenne
Commissioner of Administration