

TO: Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness
FROM: Chief Shirell Parfait-Dardar and Alessandra Jerolleman
RE: Housing Challenges After Hurricane Ida
DATE: March 5, 2022

This memo provides an overview of some of the significant challenges faced by Louisiana's coastal indigenous peoples following Hurricane Ida. It is intended to inform pre-disaster planning for post-disaster housing recovery.

Background

Hurricane Ida made landfall in coastal Louisiana on August 26, 2021. It was a Category 4 storm with maximum sustained winds of 150mph, and peak gusts of as high as 172mph¹, coming in right over Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. The Hurricane left widespread devastation in its wake, demolishing homes, uprooting and toppling trees, and leaving the vast majority of families in its path in need of temporary housing assistance to begin the difficult task of rebuilding.

Hurricane Ida was just one of many storms to impact Louisiana's coastal communities over the past several decades, coming at a time when the tribes were already struggling with continued health and economic fallout from Covid-19, coupled with the ongoing impacts to their livelihoods that rely on our environment, related to a changing climate and sea level rise. Power outages lasted weeks, while families struggled to begin the process of recovering, without access to critical resources. Many elderly families resorted to living in cars, tents or in partially demolished homes², and many families remain unhoused today.

- The provision of temporary housing after a major disaster is challenging for all coastal communities, but there are unique aspects of the tribal communities that make post-disaster housing even more difficult. Perhaps the most significant issue, and one not directly addressed in this memo, is the lack of a clear sovereign-to-sovereign path of communication between tribal leaders and the state of Louisiana, or FEMA. Other challenges include:
 - Tribal members in mobile homes and trailers;
 - Aging populations and technological requirements for assistance;
 - Heirs property issues;
 - Informal housing arrangements;
 - Remoteness of the impacted areas;
 - Extensive delays in the provision of assistance and restoration of utilities;
 - A lack of inspectors and contractors to install temporary housing; and,
 - The lack of viable and timely temporary housing options.

¹ Ida's impact from the Gulf Coast to Northeast – by the numbers. The Washington Post. Ian Livingston. September 3, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/09/03/hurricane-ida-numbers-surge-wind-pressure-damage/>

² Three Months After Hurricane Ida, Residents Are Still Waiting for FEMA Housing. The New York Times. Sophie Kasakove and Katy Reckdahl. December 5, 2021

Overview of Challenges

Mobile Homes and Trailers

Many tribal community members live in older mobile homes or trailers, some of which have damage from previous storms³ and some of which can no longer be insured⁴. In many cases these mobile homes house multiple families. Repairs or replacement are not always an option following a storm, due to the age and condition of the unit, lack of insurance, or insufficient insurance. Using any funds recovered from insurance to build a more permanent structure is often prohibited by elevation required for new construction being quite high, in many cases up to eight feet above the ground.

Another related challenge has to do with the ownership of these mobile homes. In many cases, ownership has not been recorded with the Parish, and so “owners” have no legal claim even though the units may be placed on family land.

Aging Populations and Technological Requirements for Assistance

The technological requirements for receiving assistance, such as having a computer, tablet or smartphone, and reliable access to cell service and Internet, are not always feasible for tribal community members. Furthermore, older community members may be less comfortable with the technology and may find the process of registering for assistance to be too difficult to navigate. Even when agencies and volunteers offer assistance in person, access to the Internet is a barrier and applicants may find themselves unable to access their applications later on.

The need to provide documentation for complicated property issues, like lack of proper legal title or adequate registration, was also challenging for families who did not know how to upload documents or lacked the time or required technology to do so.

Delays in the Provision of Governmental Assistance

Delays in immediate services, such as...(add some here) as well as delays in permitting make it more difficult for tribal communities to begin the work on repair and restoration. Tribal community members reported waiting weeks to hear from local and state government⁵, and in many cases their only access to food, water, and materials such as tarps and cleaning supplies was via allied organizations and donations. These delays directly correlate to a delay in beginning rebuilding.

³ Halle Parker. September 6, 2021. The Advocate. For Louisiana's coastal tribes, being at the end of the earth is a dangerous place.

⁴ Delaney Nolan. December 12, 2021. Aljazeera. The Louisiana Indigenous Community fighting for hurricane justice

⁵ Kezia Setyawan. September 6, 2021. The Houma Courier. Pointe-au-Chien tribe members take recovery into their own hands

Delays in the Restoration of Utilities (Electric, Water, Internet, and Cell)

For many of the indigenous communities, the very first efforts at removing debris and opening up road access were completed by the tribal members themselves. The restoration of electricity, water, cell service and internet took much longer; over a month for electricity and up to three months for Internet. These delays made it impossible for community members to begin rebuilding, and notably to access assistance programs, to communicate with insurance adjustors, and in general just to begin recovery.

Delays in Damage Assessment

Delays in damage assessments by government officials and insurance adjustors, largely due to communications and access difficulties, increased uncertainty, prolonged times without a safe, stable shelter, and compounded stress for tribal community members.

Lack of Viable Temporary Housing Options

Tribal community members need access to temporary and permanent housing solutions following a disaster, like Hurricane Ida. Without access to temporary housing, families either cannot return to begin the business of recovery, or they are forced to live in unsafe conditions. Many families have resorted to sleeping in tents or in gutted, partially destroyed, and unhealthy homes. Although some families have been able to stay with relatives, the nature of these communities is such that many extended families remain in close proximity to each other and relatives are likely to have been impacted by the disaster as well. In many cases, extended families still live together or live on the same property, meaning all of the family members are living under unsafe, unstable conditions.

Temporary housing options such as hotels have been made available for some, but the hotels are at too great of a distance from the impacted community to allow tribal members to work on rebuilding. Similarly, state shelters and other similar facilities were far from the community. Trailers and mobile homes have been slow to deploy, and not available in a sufficient quantity. As of December, 2021, there had been over 10,000 requests for temporary trailers, and less than 500 occupied by mid January of 2022⁶. Similarly, the state's temporary housing program had delivered only 400 campers by December 2021, with less than half hooked up⁷. In some cases tribal members have found their own units, but been unable to secure timely assistance with installations and inspections.

⁶ Dan Copp. January 26, 2022. The Houma Courier. Housing for residents displaced by Ida remains a challenge in Terrebonne and Lafourche

⁷ Delaney Nolan. December 12, 2021. Aljazeera. The Louisiana Indigenous Community fighting for hurricane justice

By January of 2022, over 700 families remained in hotels, but the hotels were often too far from their homes to allow access for rebuilding⁸.

There are opportunities to pursue container housing, modular housing and other innovative models, but local permitting restrictions limit the tribes' ability to accept resources from their partners and to pursue innovation⁹.

Lack of Access to Licensed Contractors

Even when tribal communities have access to the financial resources needed for rebuilding, the remote nature of their communities makes it more difficult for them to obtain assistance from licensed contractors. Many contractors prefer to stay in larger cities, such as Houma, where there is a greater concentration of homes needing repair, and less drive time.

Many tribal members have the requisite skills to do much of the work directly themselves, but are unlicensed, and therefore barred from commencing their own rebuilding.

Access to Building Materials and Labor

Another challenge in coastal communities is lack of building materials, and skilled labor. The regional demands on both materials and labor have disproportionately impacted more remote areas. Furthermore, when volunteer labor is available, a lack of housing, including hotels, trailers or camping sites, prevents the communities from utilizing such labor.

Affordability

Many coastal families are on fixed incomes, including many who are retirees or who practice a traditional subsistence lifestyle. Rising costs of flood insurance make carrying insurance an impossibility, creating a barrier to certain kinds of assistance. For example, some non-profit organizations may be willing to rebuild homes, but require that flood insurance be carried afterward. This is not affordable. Furthermore, the increased value of a new home, even one that is quite modest in size, can push families into a higher property tax payment, creating another insurmountable financial burden.

Summary

Hurricane Ida was just one of many storms to impact Louisiana's coastal communities over the past several decades and we can expect to see many more in the future, including possibly this

⁸ Dan Copp. January 26, 2022. The Houma Courier. Housing for residents displaced by Ida remains a challenge in Terrebonne and Lafourche

⁹ According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, pre-disaster planning for permanent housing recovery should include consideration of modifications to local codes and zoning to permit rapid deployment of housing solution such as modular and manufactured homes. *Pre-Disaster Planning for Permanent Housing Recovery – Vol. 1, 2012.*

coming hurricane season. As communities continue struggling with health and economic fallout from Covid-19, the direct economic impacts of conflicts in Europe, and other ongoing impacts to their livelihoods, it becomes more and more critical to address these needs and prevent their recurrence. The following recommendations are proposed for your consideration.

1. Delayed and too little temporary on-site housing post disaster
Recommendation: The state might allocate annual funding and be prepared to deploy trailers to remote tribal communities.
2. Tribes unable to access skilled labor for rebuilding
Recommendation: Create an exemption process that permits skilled tribal members to rebuild their own homes and those of other tribal members with the supervision of a licensed contractor.
3. Lack of access to building materials
Recommendation: Contract with suppliers to ensure sufficient access to building materials for remote tribal communities at a reduced cost.
4. Delays in restoration of power and utilities
Recommendation: Create a pre-disaster, post-disaster recovery plan to address shortcomings in restoration of utilities
5. Affordability
Recommendation: Work with local tax assessors to create exemptions for low-income families whose property values are rising above the threshold due to rebuilding.
6. Delays in the provision of governmental assistance
Recommendation: Acknowledge tribal sovereignty and create government to government communication mechanisms.