

FEMA defends 650K denials for post-Ike aid

by AP-News

HOUSTON (AP) — The Federal Emergency Management Agency has denied nearly 650,000 applications for housing aid after Hurricane Ike hit southeast Texas, finding that nearly 90% of all claimants were ineligible for FEMA help. Those rejected and their attorneys say the inspectors are unqualified or poorly trained and the inspection system is flawed in ways that withhold help from deserving people. FEMA says the numbers reflect a widespread misunderstanding of the agency's mission.

The Houston Chronicle reported Sunday that FEMA has received more than 730,000 applications for money to help with home repairs, mobile homes or other housing services needed after Ike caused widespread damage in September. So far, FEMA has paid out about \$371 million to 82,000 applicants, declaring almost 650,000 ineligible for aid.

An attorney for a homeowner challenging his FEMA assistance as insufficient told the newspaper the wide gap between applicants and paid claims is caused in part by unqualified or poorly trained FEMA inspectors who decide whether to approve assistance.

"I'm aware of a musician and a short-order cook who got these jobs," Mark J. Grandich said. "It seems to me that (FEMA) hired a bunch of people, basically just anybody, and put them on the street after one day of training."

FIND MORE STORIES IN: Texas | Federal Emergency Management Agency | Hurricane Ike | Houston Chronicle | post-Ike At the peak of its individual assistance program late last year, FEMA and its contractors put as many as 2,360 inspectors on the streets to document damage to homes. Critics charge that these inspectors were motivated to work quickly because they are paid a flat fee per inspection and must cover most of their own expenses.

The Houston Chronicle interviewed a woman told by child welfare workers that her damaged apartment wasn't safe for her children and a condominium owner whose unit was condemned by a city building inspector. Both the woman and the condo owner told the newspaper that FEMA inspectors said their homes were habitable.

FEMA refused to discuss individual cases with the Chronicle. But officials acknowledged that inspectors sometimes make mistakes, and encouraged people to file appeals if they believe they were unfairly denied assistance.

"Most times, (eligibility is) obvious," said Timothy Cannon, a FEMA inspections supervisor. "It's not a tough question."

He said people sometimes don't understand the limits of FEMA's help. The agency will pay only for home repairs that aren't covered by insurance and will provide only enough money to make the home safe, secure and functional.

For example, in a house with two bedrooms and a single occupant, FEMA won't pay to repair the second bedroom if the other is still habitable, Cannon said. It will pay to patch a leaky roof, but not to replace it.

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