

FEMA Ends Its Anti-Religious Funding Policies

When Hurricanes Irma and Harvey struck Texas and Florida, churches and houses of worship stood on the front lines of recovery. Yet, when they asked the federal government for support, they refused.

Three months ago, we engaged this issue—calling for an end to the discrimination and penalties aimed at churches and other houses of worship. We noted that it was unfair that these institutions be excluded from federal relief funding.

Now, the government has changed its tune and ended its discriminatory regulations.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) now says churches will no longer be exempt from aid eligibility—clearing the way for such organizations to request government aid following hurricanes Irma and Harvey. This is a significant victory that gives churches access to the emergency relief that they deserve and need—finally on track to receive the emergency funding that will allow them to maximize their community service.

When natural disasters strike, churches and other houses of worship often serve as a place of refuge. They provide shelter, food, water and basic necessities to those who have been affected by severe weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, tropical storms, and earthquakes. When Texas and Florida were devastated by Irma and Harvey, churches played a critical role in providing relief.

Unfortunately, despite their efforts, regulations from FEMA have prevented houses of worship from even applying for relief funding. Specifically, the regulations prevent houses of worship from applying for FEMA Public Assistance grants. These

grants are used to repair and replace damaged non-profit buildings and facilities in the wake of a natural disaster.

Finally, in response to a lawsuit filed last year by three churches who suffered damage from Hurricane Harvey, FEMA has announced it will end its discriminatory practice. Now, all private non-profit organizations that were damaged on or had pending request as of Aug. 23, 2017 may apply to receive aid. Of note, the assistance is limited to costs not covered by the U.S. Small Business Administration loan program.

Regardless of the program's specifics, what matters is the decision to end this funding discrimination that not only violated the First Amendment rights of churches, but also made it more difficult for volunteers to provide vital disaster relief services to those in need.

At the ACLJ, we have advocated an end to discrimination against religious organizations and churches not just in this program but in all government programs. When the federal government asked how they could end discrimination against religious and faith-based organizations, we answered: stop doing it. Specifically, we told them that the policy of barring faith-based groups from receiving funds from the federal government, the "largest grant maker" in the country, had to end.

We are encouraged to see a federal agency heeding our advice and ending its ineffective and discriminatory policies. We hope the rest of the federal government will take notice and follow suit.

With your help and support, we can continue to fight for religious liberty and an end to religious discrimination in our government.

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