

FEMA Suggests It Will Help Churches Only to Deny Them Aid

FEMA invited hurricane-hit houses of worship to apply for aid in Houston, yet new evidence submitted in court yesterday shows that FEMA continues to deny aid to numerous churches across Texas in need of disaster relief. In *Harvest Family Church v. FEMA*, three small Texas churches are challenging FEMA's aid policy after the devastation of Hurricane Harvey. Although FEMA uses churches as staging areas for its relief efforts, it denies them aid grants simply because they are religious.

Last month, Becket filed a lawsuit against FEMA on behalf of Harvest Family Church, Hi-Way Tabernacle and Rockport First Assembly of God. In an attempt to delay a court ruling, FEMA claimed that churches are welcome to apply for aid despite its "no churches need apply" policy. But over the past several weeks, these three churches—and many others—have been told that they are not eligible, and one even had a grant application rejected. Yesterday Becket told the court, "government officials . . . stated that Hi-Way Tabernacle and Harvest Family Church were 'absolutely not eligible' for PA grant funds under FEMA's policy." Government officials also admitted that they are telling other churches the exact same thing.

Pastor Bruce Frazier of Rockport First Assembly of God told the court: "I have been working on emergency repairs and recovery efforts at the church 10 hours a day, six days a week since the hurricane." Pastor Frazier explained to the court that he took several hours away from working on repairs to the church in order to apply for the grant he was offered, only to have it denied.

Houses of worship were among the first to respond in Harvey's aftermath, and they continue to provide aid to their communities. Yet FEMA continues to discriminate against churches while, at the same time, using them for its own relief efforts. Their discriminatory policy stands in defiance of the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer* that protects the right of religious organizations to participate in widely available programs on equal footing with secular organizations.

"FEMA isn't just sending churches to the back of the line, it's telling them don't bother lining up," said Diana Verm, legal counsel at Becket, the nonprofit law firm representing the three churches. "FEMA should stop wasting time, do the right thing and help churches help others."