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Agency Is Under Pressure to Develop Disaster Housing

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Lori Waselchuk for The New York Times

Mississippi Cottages, awaiting delivery at a staging area in Gulfport, Miss., are the state's solution to the need for temporary emergency housing.

By LESLIE EATON Published: April 13, 2008

GULFPORT, Miss. — After the federal government announced in February that it would no longer use travel trailers to house the victims of future disasters, there was an initial sense of relief along the hurricane-scarred Gulf Coast.

Enlarge This Image



Lori Waselchuk for The New York Times

Vicki Ladner Meshell and her husband, Rickey, who lost their home in Long Beach, Miss., in Hurricane Katrina's storm surge.

The flimsy little white boxes are unpleasant to live in and tainted with toxic formaldehyde fumes. And they cost the federal government billions of dollars.

But that relief quickly turned to exasperation when it became clear that the government did not have an immediate backup plan. Without the trailers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has no reliable way to rush immediate shelter to thousands of victims of an earthquake, or a wildfire, or another catastrophic

hurricane.

Though FEMA is considering several new ideas, including a so-called panelized home partially built at a factory, the agency's effort to develop a trailer replacement has not impressed many housing experts.

"FEMA seems like a babe in the woods on this stuff," said John Henneberger, co-director of the Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service, which is working on trailer alternatives. "They seem to be clueless."

The view in Washington is not much different. "It just sounds like they still don't know what they're talking about, to be frank," said Ronald D. Utt, a senior research fellow at

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the conservative Heritage Foundation. “To say, O.K., we didn’t get it right with trailers so we’ll move on to something more exotic like prefab housing is a bizarre suggestion.”

There are several proposals that FEMA may try in future disasters, including houses made of shipping containers and one that can be shipped flat and unfolded upon delivery. Here in Gulfport, the state has designed and built what are known as the [Mississippi Cottages](#) — skinny but sturdy little houses that can be seen lined up by the hundreds in a staging area here.

But while the cottages are the only alternative that has been fully tested and appear popular with those who live in them, they have proved hard to place because of local government resistance. And they were produced through an effort that FEMA may have a hard time replicating.

FEMA is under increasing pressure from Congress to develop disaster housing. Senator [Mary L. Landrieu](#), the [Louisiana](#) Democrat who leads a subcommittee on disaster recovery, has begun an investigation into the agency’s policies, and, at a hearing this month, castigated agency officials for failing to develop a strategic plan. Congress had set a deadline for the plan of July 1, 2007; the agency now says it hopes to have one by June 1.

Her goal, Ms. Landrieu said in an e-mail message, is to “make sure the next time a disaster strikes, housing — a basic human need — will be safe for all our families.”

FEMA officials say they are pushing hard to move the last 30,000 families out of temporary housing, most of which is made up of trailers. (There were almost 119,000 trailers in use at the peak.) As the trailers are emptied, they will probably be sold for scrap, said David Garratt, acting assistant administrator for disaster assistance at FEMA.

As for the pace of the hunt for a replacement, “we recognize, to some extent, this is an urgent need,” Mr. Garratt said. “But we don’t want to treat disaster victims as guinea pigs.”

In the meantime, FEMA is planning to order formaldehyde-free mobile homes and a little-used mini-mobile home, called a “park model,” to house disaster victims. But it is far harder to find sites for the bigger units; last fall, for example, the agency had more than 57,000 trailers in use along the Gulf Coast, but fewer than 7,000 mobile homes, and only 1,600 park units.

After the California wildfires last fall, FEMA was able to install only 50 mobile homes; it found them hard to transport on winding roads and hard to install on steep sites, said Jack Schuback, who runs the agency’s joint housing solutions group.

Many experts have long urged FEMA to work closely with federal housing officials to find existing apartments for disaster victims, rather than focus on trailers. The agency insists that it does so whenever possible, although its efforts along those lines in New Orleans and Mississippi have been roundly criticized. But after a disaster like [Hurricane Katrina](#), there was no existing housing nearby.

Relocating families might mean sending them far from their jobs and the houses they hope to rebuild.

One of FEMA’s criteria in evaluating trailer alternatives is that they have a smaller footprint than mobile homes, Mr. Schuback said.

The agency is also looking for housing that can accommodate families and people with disabilities, that can be delivered quickly, that can be installed in different environments, and that will not be too costly. The travel trailers cost as little as \$11,000 apiece, but

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installing and maintaining them averaged \$30,000, and sometimes far more, according to the [Government Accountability Office](#).

Using a lengthy checklist, FEMA has evaluated about 66 proposals, Mr. Schuback said, and visited 37 sites. But only half a dozen have been deemed promising enough to try during a disaster.

“I want to emphasize that we have not yet found the golden unit that will solve all disaster housing,” he said. “The process has ruled out far more units than it has yielded.”

The agency is being cagey about which proposals made the cut, but it did say that it is evaluating two that are being tried by states under a \$400 million pilot project that Congress required FEMA to undertake in June 2006.

Texas is supposed to try the panelized home. It has signed a contract with an international company called Heston, but none of the houses have been built.

The only units FEMA says it is planning to test are the Mississippi Cottages, which have tin roofs, small porches and are colored like Easter eggs — rose-hip pink, malted mint, cloudless blue. The cottages are on wheels, but the larger models can be put on permanent foundations. All are equipped with appliances, beds, a table and chairs, ceiling fans, even pots and pans, and cost an average of \$32,000 apiece to build.

With its built-in closets and spacious kitchen cupboards, their cottage feels like a mansion, said Vicki Ladner Meshell and her husband, Rickey, whose apartment in Long Beach was washed away by Hurricane Katrina’s storm surge.

“We love it — except when all four of us are trying to get ready at once,” Ms. Meshell said of the little aqua-colored cottage, which her family eventually hopes to buy. The cottage is rent-free, although they pay \$210 a month for the trailer site, plus utilities.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency has installed more than 2,000 of them throughout southern Mississippi, and plans to put in 3,500.

But local governments in Mississippi have resisted the cottages. They fear people who get cottages will simply live in them and not rebuild their houses, said Mike Womack, executive director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency.

“They’re too nice,” he said. “I’ve heard this over and over again.”

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