

FEMA to evict tens of thousands of Katrina victims

Tom Carter
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The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced Tuesday that it would stop paying for housing for most of the nearly 60,000 families left homeless by Hurricane Katrina who are staying in government-paid hotel and motel rooms. The cutoff will be effective December 1.

This latest move by FEMA will result in mass evictions and leave tens of thousands homeless. It the latest demonstration of the contempt and indifference of the Bush administration for ordinary working people still suffering three months after Katrina hit land.

More than 1 million people were displaced in the historic disaster, and in Texas alone, 15,000 people face immediate eviction from their apartments. Another 50,000 will not be able to pay December's rent. In cities throughout the country, victims who cannot pull together the resources to meet the inflated rent prices are being shown the door. In Charlotte, North Carolina, for instance, 4,000 face eviction. FEMA has also announced that in the near future it move out 200,000 people it has housed in hotels, adding to the numbers of evictions.

FEMA currently offers no more than \$2,358 for three months to cover all of the costs of living, which does not go very far for people who have lost everything. Because of the difficult filing process and other bureaucratic obstacles, many have not seen any money at all. In many cases, the checks were mailed to the victims' addresses in New Orleans, where they have no chance of retrieving them.

Meanwhile, landlords have been free to take advantage of the tight market for living space to milk Katrina victims for every last penny. Some New Orleans landlords are even still charging rent to victims whose apartments were wiped out in the flood.

FEMA has acknowledged that this is happening, but

does not regard it as a problem. "If [landlords] choose to evict people," FEMA spokesman Nicol Andrews said, "they're free to do that." Some landlords are also evicting people without so much as an appearance in court, in violation of due process.

Laura Tuggle, a lawyer with the Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, described one such eviction in an interview with the *Times-Picayune*. "One of my clients had several conversations with her landlord and they were all very pleasant, but when she got back, her building was gutted and all of her things were on the street." Even operating within the law in Louisiana, eviction notices can be given with only 10 days' notice.

With their savings running dry, the most desperate of Katrina's victims are being turned out onto the street. With winter just setting in, thousands face the prospect of long months of hunger, cold and misery as a direct consequence of the US government's blatant disregard for the most vulnerable.

"They are the poorest folks...and they are the ones who are going to be left with nothing," Sheila Crowley, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, told *USA Today*. "It's going to show up at homeless shelters this winter."

In the face of popular hostility to the evictions and the inadequate resources provided to the victims, federal and state institutions are engaged in schoolyard finger-pointing and shoulder-shrugging, each attempting to place the responsibility for the disaster on some other institution. Texas Governor Rick Perry accused FEMA of providing insufficient resources to the state, and FEMA blamed the state institutions for not taking adequate advantage of their "reimbursement" plan.

In one particularly despicable case, FEMA attempted to blame the victims themselves. "It's their responsibility to use [the money] as it's intended for,"

FEMA spokesman Mike Sweet told the *American-Statesman*. “The funding mechanism to make sure that folks are able to pay their rent is working,” said FEMA spokeswoman Nicol Andrews.

If anyone is to be found guilty in the disaster, it is the federal and local officials who for years ignored warnings about the inadequacy of the New Orleans levees, squandered public funds, and failed to come up with so much as a basic plan for evacuation, accommodation and reconstruction in the case of a hurricane disaster.

Meanwhile, Congress is meeting in Washington to decide on cuts in Medicaid, school lunches, and other social programs. At the same time, as much as \$70 billion is being set aside in the form of tax handouts for the obscenely wealthy, while a further \$391 billion is appropriated for the illegal war in Iraq.

This latest episode in the Katrina tragedy exposes once again the bleak reality of American capitalism, a society geared exclusively toward profiteering for the ultra-rich at the expense of working people.

Commenting on the dimensions of the catastrophe facing thousands in the face of the FEMA evictions, Chris Estes, executive director the North Carolina Housing Coalition, told the Associated Press, “It would be a tragedy if they are evicted. [People] can’t wrap their mind around how much it is going to take for them to make it.”



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