

New Jersey motel fire kills Hurricane Sandy evacuees

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Nearly a year and a half after Hurricane Sandy hit the New York-New Jersey area in October 2012 many residents are still suffering the after-effects not only of the storm itself, but of the criminally inadequate government response.

The plight of many thousands whose lives continue to be impacted was brought into sharp focus last Friday when fire destroyed the two-story Mariner's Cove Motor Inn motel in the New Jersey coastal community of Point Pleasant Beach, 50 miles south of New York City. Four people were killed and eight injured, three critically, out of about 40 residents. An initial investigation did not reveal the fire's cause.

Media reports suggest that many of the year-round residents of the hotel belonged to the most vulnerable sections of the population, including the long-term unemployed.

While during the summer the motel hosts vacationers visiting the Jersey shore, in the off-season it had become home to families who remain displaced as a result of the hurricane. The wooden motel itself was damaged by Sandy and had been repaired just in time for last year's summer season.

News reports indicate that the motel's manager, Raj Patel, who lived there with his family, had allowed some of the residents to stay on after the benefits they received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) due to losses caused by the hurricane had expired.

In late October 2012, "Superstorm" Sandy, a Category 3 storm, traveled from the Caribbean up the east coast of the United States, eventually making landfall in the northern Atlantic seaboard of the US. A total of 285 deaths were attributed to the storm and an estimated \$68 billion in damage was caused, according to the National Weather Service.

The devastation wrought by Sandy drove many thousands of people from their damaged homes. Some have been repaired and reoccupied. Many homes, however, were either judged a total loss or have not been repaired because of the owners' lack of resources and delays in receipt of aid (see "US: Anger on first anniversary of Hurricane Sandy")

In recent months, the failure of federal and state agencies to effectively address the severe effects of the hurricane on thousands of people, even after a year and a half, boiled over in confrontations with New Jersey's governor Chris Christie. The Republican governor and potential presidential candidate was re-elected last fall in part based on claims that he successfully managed the post-Sandy recovery. The reality, consciously downplayed by the media and the political establishment during the campaign, was that large numbers of those affected by the storm had not, in fact, experienced "recovery," and many still have not. Rather, the governor has used the recovery effort to his own advantage.

During Christie's re-election campaign, the state ran a \$25 million advertising campaign, approved by the federal government, supposedly to promote the revival of tourism at the Jersey shore under the slogan "Stronger than the Storm." The ads prominently featured Christie and his family in a blatant use of public funds to promote his re-election. The cost of the ad campaign totaled twice the amount so far given to small businesses to rebuild after the storm. The firm selected to create the advertising campaign charged the state \$2 million more than the next highest bidder. The latter had not proposed to feature Christie in the ads.

A New Jersey representative, Frank Pallone, complained, "This was money that could have directly been used for Sandy recovery. And, as you know, many

of my constituents still haven't gotten the money that is owed them to rebuild their homes or raise their homes or to help."

Following the George Washington Bridge lane closure "Bridgagate" scandal revelations, more questions have been raised regarding Governor Christie's use of Sandy recovery funds. In one instance, the mayor of Hoboken, a city in northeastern New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City, which was severely impacted by Sandy, accused the governor of threatening to withhold relief funds if the mayor did not back a redevelopment plan proposed by a company favored by Christie.

In another allegation, Christie has been accused of steering \$6 million in Sandy recovery funds to a development project in an Essex County town not severely impacted by the storm; a project that had already been planned years before the hurricane. The allocation of funds was announced shortly after the town's Democratic mayor endorsed Republican Christie's re-election campaign.

The federal government's Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is currently auditing New Jersey's allocation of the \$1.5 billion it has already received in recovery aid. A recent review by New York Public Radio found gross inconsistencies and irregularities in the proposed allotment of funds to municipalities.

In a series of recent "town hall" meetings in affected areas, Christie has repeatedly been confronted by local residents demanding to know why his much touted recovery efforts have not reached them. The complaints include long delays in receiving aid, lost and mistakenly rejected applications, callous bureaucrats and inadequate assistance to the poor and minorities. In his typically arrogant fashion, the governor has sought to ignore, belittle or silence his questioners. Similar issues have been raised with federal officials.

While the immediate cause of last Friday's motel fire is likely unrelated to Hurricane Sandy, the fact that the victims were there and not in their own homes certainly is a consequence of the failure to properly respond to the storm's aftermath.

This is not simply a question of "corruption," although that is certainly involved. Abuses may have come to light most notably in New Jersey; however, similar problems exist in other areas impacted by the

storm. This contrasts sharply with the rapid recovery effort carried out in lower Manhattan, home of Wall Street.



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