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| Date | September 4, 2024 |
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WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO BE INCLUDED IN OFFICIAL HEARING RECORD

**Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Field Hearing on Assessing the Federal Government's Response
to the 2023 Maui Wildfires**

We want to hear your story. Below please provide your comments regarding your experiences or thoughts on the federal response and recovery to the Lahaina wildfires. Your response will help inform the Committee's oversight and any recommendations for future congressional action.

My experience working in community outreach since 8/8/23 has been that SBA, USACE, and EPA have been the best parts of the federal response to this disaster while FEMA has been the worst. The first 3 have been open to being flexible and trying their best to communicate with the community; FEMA, however, has had a "we know best" approach since the beginning. That is not to say they haven't taken feedback from community stakeholders because they have. BUT I've been told by many federal partners since the beginning (repeatedly, as far back as September) that we should have had a speakers bureau of subject matter experts, and this did not happen under Bob Fenton's leadership. This meant that survivors were learning about the SBA's programs from him, not SBA leadership. This was a big part of what you called SBA's messaging problem. As Mr. Fenton said, their system is overly bureaucratic - this means that it does not accommodate our multi-generational family living situations. The direct lease program - that I do believe was a good decision - was NOT well executed. Local property management companies should have been used. Sne Patel tried to offer his assistance to no response multiple times, though he works as a local STR property manager and could have helped entice owners into participating in the program as he "speaks their language." Too much was paid to these property owners, and many of these properties sat empty, while owners were paid, waiting for background checks to be processed, housing inspections, and while survivors sat on alert - told to be ready to move at any moment - ultimately waiting weeks to hear from their FEMA contact (who was often rotated from their deployment). These FEMA contacts - who called themselves case workers, though higher ups in FEMA assured me that position did not exist - told survivors not to speak to anyone else about their case. →

*The official hearing record will be made public as part of the transcript. This will be posted on the Committee on Oversight and Accountability website at: oversight.house.gov

meanwhile, my FEMA contacts on the ground insisted that survivors needed to continually follow up on their own, since their workers are constantly rotated from deployment. This disconnect exacerbated stress amongst survivors and added to their never-ending confusion about this process. This is an example to Bob Fenton's point about the lack of consistency in messaging throughout the large organization.

* The direct lease program needs to be reopened immediately. *
It was closed June 30, 2024 - too soon and without notice. The homeowners who have and are running out of their ALE/LOU insurance money were led to believe they would be eligible for the direct lease program, then it was closed and now they are only eligible for housing assistance. This assistance does not cover the full cost of rent - or even close to it - and these people are already still paying mortgages on ash. They cannot afford any amount of rent on top of that.

Many of our residents were consistently told that they will need to consider moving away. Most of those who have moved away have been unable to receive any housing assistance of any kind, which has compounded the pain of moving away from their homes.

FEMA is also the entity which has brought in workers who've acted without empathy or cultural sensitivity. They have many workers for whom this is the opposite of true, but many of these mainlanders only took the assignment for the high per diem and trip to Hawaii rather than to help our community.

To a question asked earlier, no - people don't know the rules, because every question you ask has an answer that begins with "well, everything is case by case..."

Many people chose to leave the FEMA assistance programs due to this confusion, the poor treatment by the workers I mentioned above, the constant moving between rooms or hotels, and other similar reasons. FEMA needs to reckon with how this crisis has been handled, though I extend my deepest gratitude to those FEMA workers who worked over 12 hours per day, often 7 days/week to do their damndest to save our people and economy.

Mahalo for bringing this hearing to Lahaina. We appreciate it.
And we are grateful for your questions about long-term planning and our rebuild.