



HOUSE KEYS | Season 1: Episode 2: HUD's Role in Disaster Recovery

Deputy Secretary Pamela Hughes Patenaude discusses the Department's role in recovery following natural disasters.



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TRANSCRIPT:

HOST: Welcome to House Keys, a podcast devoted to housing. We all have a home, although, some of course don't. In coming conversations, we will talk about homelessness in this country.

In our last installment, we spoke with the number one housing official in the federal government, U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson, about the increasing rents families are paying in many parts of this country.

Today, we sit down with the Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Housing and Urban Development, Pamela Hughes Patenaude and we're going to be talking about disasters and what role the federal government plays in helping communities put the pieces back together again. Madam Secretary, thanks for joining us.

PATENAUDE: Brian, thanks for this opportunity to talk about a really important subject and very timely.

HOST: Now, this isn't your first rodeo. You've in fact been at HUD now for the fourth time?

PATENAUDE: This is my fourth tour of duty. I began in 1982 as an intern in the Inspector General's office.

HOST: In this iteration, you are the number two here at HUD. Part of your portfolio of course is leading the Department in all of the efforts to recover from some really major disasters. Last year was a disastrous year. We had three major hurricanes – Harvey, Irma, and Maria. We had California wildfires. This year, we've had two major hurricanes – Michael and Florence. And again – just a horrific fire season out West. Where does HUD and the federal government fit into disasters like these?

PATENAUDE: Well Brian, we also had a volcano in Hawaii last year and very recently we had a typhoon hit Guam and that was very devastating. So, the Department of Housing and Urban Development plays a very important role in disaster recovery, but it's in fact the critical role is long term recovery through the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program.

We've had, to date, over \$85 billion appropriated through supplemental appropriations by Congress to address these Presidential declared disasters – and this is dating back a couple of decades now. But where HUD really began to be a key player in disaster recovery was after Hurricane Katrina, Wilma, and Rita, and of course Superstorm Sandy was also a historic storm. This responsibility of long-term recovery is not exclusive. We play a support role along with (Federal Emergency Management Agency) FEMA, the Army Corp of Engineers, and (Small Business Administration) SBA in the immediate aftermath. As a matter of fact, we had hundreds of personnel deployed to address the 2017 hurricane season and now this 2018 season.

HOST: We saw last year, Hurricanes Irma and Maria really devastate Puerto Rico. And you've been to Puerto Rico now...

PATENAUDE: I've made seven visits to Puerto Rico since Maria devastated the island. It's a unique situation – the geographic isolation of Puerto Rico makes it very difficult. Certainly, the federal government did an excellent job on both the immediate recovery efforts and other long-term recovery efforts are underway.

HOST: Now, you use the term long-term recovery to maybe separate it from the early days of the response phase.

PATENAUDE: So the very early stages are search and rescue and then we have the short term recovery where we'd be doing repairs on people's homes - the blue tarps, getting people back into their homes, but not in a permanent condition.

So, HUD plays a role in rebuilding homes, and at times, elevating homes. We have a focus on mitigation now because we have too much experience with hurricanes. We have an excellent example of a hurricane coming back and hitting the exact same footprint. Matthew struck South Carolina and North Carolina in October of 2016 and then Michael hits the same footprint and then some. So, communities that were just beginning to recover, people just getting back in their homes, were hit again.

So, the mitigation efforts, HUD really focusing on prevention - that's key in disaster preparation, but in mitigation - to make sure that we're not rebuilding where this is going to happen time and time again. These are hundred year, one thousand-year floods as a result of these hurricanes, but they're happening 24 months apart.

HOST: Do you think Americans, Congress, even local officials are tiring having to keep recovering in the same places?

PATENAUDE: Certainly, in the hurricane territory I think there is absolutely fatigue. There's limited capacity in these states to be able to deal with this. They have experience - every state - has experience administering the Community Development Block Grant program. But the multiplier when we are talking about disasters, this is not a \$2 million or \$3 million dollar grant. These are \$50 million dollars. In the case of Puerto Rico, we're talking billions of dollars... Texas, Florida, that's in the billion-dollar range.

HOST: Now the model that HUD has used for many years now, is to give these many millions and in some cases billions of dollars to state governments primarily. Are they ready for that kind of money? Can they actually use it?

PATENAUDE: They're not necessarily ready the day after the storm, but they can ramp up. They can create capacity. The federal government does not have that capacity nor do we have that expertise. Every community is different and every storm is different. I see no alternative except to delegate - to have the governors and local elected officials to really focus on the rebuilding of their communities.

HOST: I imagine that with so many states receiving some share of this money that some do it better than others quite honestly.

PATENAUDE: We are seeing a difference. You know, we consider South Carolina a high performer, Florida, they have a lot of experience, dating back to Hurricane Andrew. There are some states that are struggling though, really struggling to build the capacity to be able to deploy these funds in a timely manner. Generally, the CDBG,

Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery funds do not start flowing until about one year post the event.

HOST: Well let me get to that. How long does it take – or maybe how long should it take – for these states to recover from these storms? Because for most folks, it's too long.

PATENAUDE: Well it's certainly too long when you are the victim – the disaster survivor. We fully agree with that, but to be able to deploy the millions and billions you have to have a disaster action plan and it has to be thoughtful. We require public participation because the elected officials can't do this without feedback from the citizens.

So, we have certainly shortened the time frame, but we think a year is a reasonable amount of time. We have to publish governance documents in the Federal Register to make sure that the public is fully informed of how these funds are going to be spent. HUD has done a great job in using the time that is allotted by Congress to do a thorough review of these plans – the plans are amended frequently, but we have to make sure that they start with a solid program in place.

HOST: The CDBG Disaster Recovery program that you've been talking about is sort of built on the idea that local folks decide how their communities will look in the years after a big storm like this, but at some point in time, should the federal government take a more forceful role in making some of these decisions? Because it's been said that in certain places – well again, the idea that certain states do a better job of recovering than do others.

PATENAUDE: So how this works is we provide technical assistance. In situations like Puerto Rico, we have technical assistance advisors that are on the ground, working alongside with them. We have HUD employees that are experts in this, but we certainly do not have the capacity to have a functioning program here in Washington D.C. and our field offices having deployed everybody – we would not be prepared for the next storm. We would not be able to run our regular programs. So, the technical assistance providers I believe are filling that gap. They are supplementing the capacity of these communities to be able to deploy the capital quickly.

HOST: When you sit down with these governors and these mayors – and you do with some frequency, and you've had a number of meetings I know with Puerto Rico's Governor - what do they tell you?

PATENAUDE: I think without a doubt this is overwhelming for governors when they're hit by a storm that is large enough to warrant a Presidential Declaration. It's certainly frightening to be the Chief Executive Officer and have to worry about not

hundreds of people, but these are tens of thousands of families that are being displaced from their homes.

We've dealt with governors in several states from Hawaii to Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Puerto Rico...they are partnering with their mayors and their local elected officials, but the burden does rest on their shoulders.

HOST: So, does recovery – proper, thoughtful, long-term recovery take a decade? Should it take that long?

PATENAUDE: Well I was the Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development back in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck, and then followed by Wilma and then Rita. And Louisiana and Mississippi still have not spent all the money that was appropriated by Congress. We're looking at thirteen years and there's still money in there.

Hurricane Sandy – that's six years now ago, six years at the end of October. There's still money to be deployed in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey.

When we do estimates of damage, it's an estimate. It's hard to say how much money they need. These formulas are not perfect. So, it's possible that there is more money than they need, and that at some point this money will be recaptured and returned to the United States Treasury, but to build infrastructure, it takes years. To build homes it takes several months, but to build infrastructure, and roads and bridges – it's a long time.

HOST: What are the pain points or the biggest challenges you see in long term disaster recovery today?

PATENAUDE: One of the concerns is duplication of benefits. So, people who have flood insurance, insurance should be first exhausted. Then, we have FEMA funds, and SBA funds, and we have CDBG funds, so I think we are really wrestling with that and we are not paying twice. Especially with the need out there – our money is meant for low and moderate income families. At a minimum we are looking at 70%. In some cases certainly the states are spending more on that vulnerable population. So, the design of the program is getting it right.

HOST: Madam Secretary, thank you for joining us.

PATENAUDE: Thank you Brian.

HOST: At the time of this recording, the holiday season is upon us. And for many folks, there is a pause to reflect upon the half million or so individuals in this country who on any given night are living in our shelters or on our streets. There are also thousands of people – both in and out of government whose life work it is to find a solution to

homelessness. In our next episode of House Keys, we're going to sit down with one of those individuals to talk about the problem of homelessness and what's being done about it. Norm Suchar may not be a household name to you, but he helps to run the federal government's largest homeless housing assistance program. 'Ending Homelessness in America', our next chapter in the ongoing conversation about the basic need for all of us - housing.

Thank you, and we'll see you then.

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