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Summary of Testimony  
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Thank you for requesting that I speak with you today about Legal Aid of North Carolina's (LANC) experiences representing clients within NCORR's Rebuild NC Program. I would like to begin my comments by providing an overview of our law firm and its Disaster Relief Project. Legal Aid of North Carolina is a nonprofit law firm that provides civil legal representation to low-income North Carolinians. We serve all 100 counties in North Carolina. Since February 2019, we have had a dedicated team handling cases for survivors of natural disasters in our state. I lead that team as its managing attorney. We work with clients on a variety of legal issues experienced post-disaster. Most of those issues relate to preserving and repairing our clients' greatest asset – their homes. Thus, we have worked to help our clients access funds from a variety of programs like FEMA, OSBM, Rebuild NC, and various charitable organizations and local recovery groups. Since the Rebuild NC program began accepting applications, about six hundred and fifty (650) North Carolinians have sought our assistance with that program.

At the committee's request, we submitted written comments about our experiences with the Rebuild NC program, along with recommendations for policy improvements. Today, I will focus my comments on LANC's experiences with the program since the September hearing conducted by this committee. Our project is currently working with around one-hundred seventy-eight (178) clients in various steps of the Rebuild process. Our caseload for our Rebuild cases has decreased substantially over the past several months. However, that is partly because we are funded by grants for the work we do and our grant to handle cases related to Hurricane Florence ended. We are now funded to work with clients from 2020-21 storms. Thus, we have made the difficult decision to close cases once our clients make it to grant signing. That decision was made prior to the previous hearing held by this committee. This also limits my ability to provide you with up-to-date information about how the construction process is progressing.

LANC has observed several substantial improvements in the delivery of services to our clients since the previous hearing. We also continue to observe delays and issues in some areas. Slightly prior to the September hearing, NCORR established a weekly call with our office to allow our attorneys to speak with supervisory staff to receive updates about our clients' cases. This has alleviated some of the frustration associated with attempting to get case updates from case managers. Since September, seven (7) appeals have been decided. This is an increase from the rate of appeal decisions we've received previously. However, we still have eleven (11) appeals pending. Six (6) of those predate the September hearing with one (1) being over a year old, one being over eleven (11) months old and one being over seven (7) months old. According to our case data, we have reportedly had only two (2) new award letters issued since the September hearing. We currently have one hundred and five (105) clients who are still awaiting award decisions. Their applications were submitted as early as March 2019 and as recently as November 2022. We believe we have submitted all required information and documentation to the clients' Rebuild case managers. Of those clients awaiting an award determination, five (5) have been waiting since 2019. A couple of those clients have complex legal issues associated with their files. However, for the rest, we have no idea why they have experienced such significant delays, despite being

in regular communication with their case managers and with other Rebuild staff for updates. However, the grant signing process has improved in that clients are now able to sign their grant agreements at the same time as accepting their award. Previously, our clients experienced lengthy delays between when they accepted their award and when they could sign their grant agreements.

An area where we have not seen improvements is communication with case management staff, especially when a client receives a new case manager. Roughly seventy-five (75) of our clients were assigned new case managers during this timeframe. LANC recognizes that this will happen as NCORR makes the change from Horne case managers to state staff. However, of those clients who have been assigned new case managers, forty-six (46) were not informed of the new assignment. Since we began representing Rebuild clients, we have experienced a great deal of case manager turnover, and our clients were rarely informed of these changes. This turnover led to real consequences for our clients where prior case managers failed to keep accurate records and our clients were forced to provide new case managers with duplicate documentation. More detailed information about this issue can be found in our comments, including issues with documentation and record-keeping.

The limited information we have about construction suggests that our clients are still experiencing some delays. We have more than fifty (50) clients who are technically in the construction phase but are still awaiting demolition. We have seen no "Notices to Proceed" issued since September and only two demolitions have occurred since the last hearing. With regards to temporary rental assistance (TRA), our few clients who are receiving this have seen increased flexibility regarding where they are able to stay. However, rental payments are still sometimes delayed. However, we likely have too few clients in this program to provide reliable feedback about how the overall TRA program is working.

I hope this information is helpful to the committee. In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that LANC appreciates NCORR's willingness to speak directly with us about our clients' cases. Open communication between our staff and theirs has had numerous intangible results for our clients and we are grateful. Finally, I appreciate this committee's request to hear from us about the impact of this important program on the lives of our clients. Continued improvement of the delivery of recovery resources in our state is the responsibility of all of us engaged in this work. I am happy to respond to any questions.