

Gov Ops Hearing Opening Statement

Good morning Mr. Chairman, ladies, and gentlemen—

I've met many of you before, but for those I haven't had the pleasure of meeting in person, I'm Eddie M. Buffaloe, Jr., Secretary of Public Safety for the State of North Carolina. I have just completed my first full year in this role and while it seemed to go by fast, I have gained a significant amount of insight into department operations in that short time.

During the first year with DPS, my goal was to become familiar with our many department missions and their successes and challenges. One of our most critical missions is the topic of discussion here today, hurricane recovery. Our state works as a team to respond to the needs of families after a disaster, working with North Carolina Emergency Management, FEMA, OSBM-DR, the General Assembly, and the North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency to provide immediate relief and long-term, sustainable recovery to our communities. I'm proud to say that since Hurricane Matthew, our team has helped to rebuild over 10,000 homes, but we have much more to do.

NCORR was created by the General Assembly in late 2018 after two devastating hurricanes hit the state in as many years. NCORR is charged with administering the state's federal HUD disaster recovery and mitigation funding, with a key mission of helping hurricane survivors rebuild smarter and stronger.

For those of you who don't know, I'm a native North Carolinian, having grown up in rural North Carolina, in Potecasi, a town of approximately 833 people. I have spent much of my life in the eastern part of the state and know firsthand what it feels like to experience these devastating hurricanes and the ongoing struggle of disaster recovery.

That's why I know that it is so critical that we continue to work as a team to finish the job of recovery from Hurricanes Matthew and Florence. As I have learned more about hurricane recovery and the difficult work of administering the CDBG-DR funds, I have tried to help my team identify and remove major impediments to getting people back in homes. I think that we are making progress, but I also know that we have more challenges ahead.

As you know, HUD disaster recovery funding is a program of last resort. We are required to follow complex federal guidelines, with multiple steps that can lead to delays. And as we discussed in the previous hearing, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant supply chain disruptions and contractor and labor shortages in the ReBuild program, as it did for everyone working on hurricane recovery.

While these have all been challenges, they are not excuses. It is not okay that families are still displaced. I know many people have suffered while waiting for their home to be rebuilt. I know many have been living in hotels and other rentals and have struggled to get by on a day-to-day basis. This is unacceptable and while progress has been made, we still have a lot of work to do.

So, my priorities are simple:

1. Get more people into step 8, which is the completion phase of their home, more quickly. Right now, 884 people are back in their homes, and our team knows we must pick up the pace. We are pushing hard to get others back home and have made some progress, but more must be done, and we are committed to getting those projects finished quickly.
2. Get people out of long-term temporary housing so they can have stability and a solid foundation in which to live their daily lives. Temporary Rental Assistance, or TRA, is an important tool that we offer to ensure that our families have somewhere to go while their homes are being rebuilt, but we know that some families have been in TRA far too long. We are prioritizing getting them home as soon as possible.
3. Perhaps most importantly, we have prioritized re-earning the trust of families that we serve by focusing on improving constituent service. Like many of you, I've learned firsthand through site visits to ReBuild projects just how difficult life can be for many of the families we serve. They deserve our immediate attention to address problems, and we've committed to doing that.

These are my priorities to get us where we need to be.

NCORR has made significant headway in obtaining more contractors and suppliers, shortening the timeframe for vendor payment, and reducing contractor paperwork, all of which are steps towards getting homes built faster. We are also finding that supply chains and labor supply are in better shape, though we still face challenges there. We are also streamlining the Rebuild process, with simplified eligibility requirements, a less burdensome application process and increased flexibility of policy to accommodate the unique needs of these families. Among the most important changes, NCORR has overhauled its case management structure, bringing all staffing in-house to ensure program participants have the same case manager from beginning to end and don't get passed off between people. This is improving communication and allowing NCORR to be more responsive and supportive of individual homeowner needs.

One year into this job, and I think we have turned a corner in addressing many of the problems that led to project delays and shortcomings in customer service. The numbers show improvement, but I won't be satisfied until everyone is back home, and I look forward to working with you to achieve that goal. Director Laura Hogshead will provide more in-depth detail of program changes. For now, I'd like to assure you that our team is fully engaged in correcting any lingering issues at NCORR and getting North Carolinians back in their homes as soon as possible.