

Good Evening RebuildNC Investigation Committee,

In two days, it will be four years since the terrible Hurricane Florence hit Eastern North Carolina and caused such utter horror and damage to the lives of so many people. However, the greater horror and damage has been caused by the bureaucratic and ineffective so-called leadership and staff of RebuildNC and NCCORR.

This is going to be long, but you all need to fully understand what my cousin and I have experienced over the past four years. I am including our experience with FEMA, RebuildNC/NCCORR, NC Hope Program, and NC Homeowners Assistance Fund as they are all connected and have affected us throughout this long process. This is only a highlight of what all we have experienced at the hands of inept and possibly corrupt government staff and officials.

In 2017, my cousin at age 79 suffered a major stroke and was recuperating at home when Hurricane Florence hit on September 13, 2018. I have been her full time caregiver since 2017 once she returned home from rehab. We were not able to evacuate as there was nowhere that could accommodate her special needs and no one knew exactly where the storm would hit. Her family home had never flooded since it was built in the 1960s. Thank the Good Lord that she had a walkup attic so we weathered the storm up there as the water came into her home. As I have said numerous times since, dealing with FEMA, and later RebuildNC/NCCORR has been way worse than the night and day we were in the attic during the storm.

Since 14 September 2018, we have had to move three times before we found somewhere to live. It has been greatly upsetting to my cousin to be out of her familiar surroundings. Thankfully we were able to stay with friends and family for a few months after the storm until we found a place to rent in late November 2018.

We were repeatedly told by FEMA from September 2018 until February 2020 that they were going to be there to help her until she got back into her beloved family home of over fifty years by assisting with the costs of temporary housing, storage fees, and the costs of moving her back into her home when it was repaired. I will say that once we got into the FEMA program at the national level after being denied repeatedly, it worked fairly well with receiving the assistance that they promised. I give kudos to the NC Bar Association who came to our town and did a special seminar for those affected by Hurricane Florence who encouraged us all to keep reapplying and challenging the FEMA. We were repeatedly told that FEMA would assist in getting her home repaired through various programs that they had. It never happened.

In late February 2020 just as the pandemic began, we were informed by FEMA that the National Emergency Declaration for Hurricane Florence had not been renewed and would expire in the middle of March 2020. There would be no more help with rent, storage, and since the home was not yet repaired, there would not be any assistance to help her move back into her home. We called several of our elected officials at the State and National level, but to no avail as everyone's focus was on the pandemic.

The next few months were very challenging financially as we did not have the funds to keep both her flooded home and our rental home going along with the storage and other expenses of everything. We had to borrow funds from friends and family to keep our heads above water. I could write a book about dealing with FEMA and how some aspects need to be corrected so that it would actually help and not cause more harm to those affected by natural disasters.

In March 2020, we were told by FEMA to not worry that all the assistance that we had at the national level was being transferred to the state level to be administered. We were told by FEMA that hundreds of millions of taxpayer funds were allocated to the State of NC for the express purpose of continuing to help those affected by Hurricane Florence. We were told to call the NC Info Line 211 and they could direct us. They said that the funds had been sent to Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army locally. We contacted both immediately. We were told by the local Catholic Charities that they only help people once in a twelve month period for either rent assistance or utility assistance with a cap of \$500.00. We applied for and received the \$500.00 rental assistance just once.

We also contacted the local Salvation Army and were treated like we were imposing upon their time and they said that we had to go through their designated local disaster relief agency to get approved for any assistance. We called the local disaster relief agency and they said that we had to completely reapply just like we did for FEMA even though our housing and financial situation had not changed from February to March 2020. We asked why they could not approve us now since we had already been approved by FEMA at the national level. They laughed and said that would make too much sense. We had no other choice so we went through the whole application process again with the local disaster relief agency which is like applying for a mortgage.

After several months of going back and forth and waiting, the woman with the local disaster relief agency said that they really did not have any funds to allocate and only helped match people with resources and that they did not have any at the time! They sent us back to the Salvation Army and the woman there was very rude.

So I began asking questions as to how much our local Salvation Army and Catholic Charities received from the State of NC specifically for those affected by Hurricane Florence and was told by the woman at the Salvation Army that it was none of my business and that they did not have to provide that information. Catholic Charities also would not reveal how much they had received and said that it was their policy to put the money into their general fund even though the funds were allocated for those affected by Hurricane Florence.

I was able to talk with our State of NC Rep. Michael Speciale and he said that there is absolutely no transparency or accountability of how the funds were used. We also tried to contact someone at NCCORR, but were told that the officials did not interface with people directly. This all needs to be fully investigated. Private charities should not be able to take public taxpayer funds with no transparency and no accountability. We were later told that we had not returned the calls of the local disaster relief agency and this is a blatant lie. We

returned every call. The last call we had with them as previously mentioned they said they could not help us! We later found out the local disaster relief agency is not even a real non-profit entity of its own, but was put under United Way as a stop gap measure. We gave our personal and financial information to an entity that should have not been given this info!

In about August 2020 or so, we were notified by FEMA that they had overpaid my cousin for storage by about \$2,500.00 or so. We requested to know exactly how this was determined and the many FEMA reps with whom we spoke could not explain it. We asked for written info as to how this was specifically determined and calculated. We never received it. As a side note, every time we called FEMA, we were connected to a different person so we had to explain our whole situation to them every time from September 2018 until present. FEMA should be set up like the insurance industry where you have one person who knows your case so it would be managed more effectively. In December 2020, we were sent a letter that was dated almost a month before we received it stating that unless we started paying them that they would refer the overpayment debt to the U. S. Treasury. We still had not received the info about how and why the overpayment was determined.

In December 2020, we called FEMA about the matter and the lady with whom we spoke was very knowledgeable about how to navigate this. She said that first we needed to have a complete copy of our file FEMA file with all notes. She said that without this information, we would not be able to defend ourselves. She put in the order for the full file to be sent to us. She also said that we could request a telephone appeal interview of the amount. We had to request this appeal by written letter sent via the FEMA system and by fax which we did. She said that this appeal process would stop all collection activity and that it would not be sent to the U. S. Treasury until a determination was made. She said that it would take about ninety days and given the holidays, we should hear something by March 2021 with the date and time of our telephone appeal interview.

We called FEMA several times over the next few months as we never received our FEMA file with notes and also to ask about the telephone appeal interview, but they did not have any information. In March 2021, we received a notice from FEMA and the U. S. Treasury that the overpayment debt would be taken out of my cousin's social security check in the amount of about \$250.00 a month until it was paid and that the U. S. Treasury was adding an \$895.00 collection fee to it! A lady at FEMA said that clearly that FEMA had dropped the ball, but there was nothing she could do!

We had had enough! We contacted our U. S. Representative Murphy's office to file a complaint against FEMA and the U. S. Treasury. His staff was very helpful in facilitating the matter, but to no positive conclusion. We also had to file written appeals to both FEMA and the U. S. Treasury, but were told that it would not stop the enforcement of the collection! We yet again asked for our FEMA file and notes. Both written appeals were denied with each of them blaming the other. It took about five times asking for our FEMA file until we received it in August 2021, but by this time they had begun the taking of the funds out of my cousin's social security check! We did not have an extra \$250.00 to spare! The FEMA file format is a total mess that is almost unintelligible! We asked to be

able to speak with someone at FEMA about the matter who could explain it and we were told that was not going to happen. We also asked to be able to speak with someone at NCCORR about the situation with the Salvation Army and were again told that they did not speak to people affected by Hurricane Florence.

Later in 2020 we were made aware of the NC Hope Program by a friend, we applied for it and received assistance for housing and some utilities, but it was not at the same level as what we were receiving from FEMA. We were never made aware of the program by FEMA, the State of North Carolina, NCCORR, the county, or the city.

Also later in 2020, we were made aware of the RebuildNC program by a friend. To say I was a bit skeptical is an understatement after what we had experienced with the Salvation Army and the local disaster relief agency. I went to the RebuildNC website and read through it and then made several telephone calls asking questions. They told me that they were a legitimate program and that based upon my cousin's situation that we should apply. I had learned from dealing with FEMA that it is best to have all the requested documents at hand and ready to be uploaded when you make an application. I worked on gathering all the updated documents and we submitted our application on December 18, 2020.

We were contacted in early January 2021 by our RebuildNC case manager Anna and she said that our application was the only one that she had ever received that had all the necessary items requested and that we moved from Step 1 (Application) immediately to Step 2 (Eligibility Review) of the eight step RebuildNC process. https://files.nc.gov/rebuildnc/Images/homeowner-recovery/ReBuild-NC-Homeowner-Recovery-Process_508.pdf. Over the next couple of months we moved to Step 3 (Duplication Check) and Step 4 (Inspections). She said that the inspection process can take a few months and to please be patient.

We went through all the inspections, but for some reason the environmental review was taking longer than expected. This is the only inspection that we were not contacted by RebuildNC and the inspection subcontractor to be there even though we requested to be notified so we could be there. In about April/May 2021, Anna said that the environmental inspection had been done and that hopefully it would be reviewed and approved and we would move to Step 5 within the next three months. We were in constant contact with her and when we spoke in August 2021, she said it looked like it may be another three months and that probably we would not hear anything until the first part of 2022. We understood from the outset that this was not going to be a fast process so we were patient.

In January 2022, we received a call from our new RebuildNC case manager Megan who said that our application had been assigned to her. Let me say that both of our local RebuildNC case managers who are employed by HORNE who is a State of NC subcontractor for the RebuildNC program have always been professional, courteous, and helpful during this long process. It is a great shame that the State of NC is ending their contract with HORNE and taking the case management function in house. Megan said that our application was still in Step 4 Inspections and that the Environmental Inspection was still under review awaiting

approval. She said to please give them another three months and it should be completed and move to the next step.

In late January, early February 2022, we were made aware of the NC Homeowners Assistance Fund program by a friend to assist with insurance, mortgage, and property taxes. <https://nchaf.gov/> We immediately applied for it and submitted all the documentation requested.

In February 2022, we were notified by the NC Hope Program that the program had not received any more funding and it was ending that month! In November 2021, when we submitted our receipts for the NC Hope Program to apply for three more months of assistance (Dec 2021, Jan 2022, and Feb 2022), we were told that the program would continue through at least 2022 and probably 2023 as the need was so great. This would have been good as we were hoping that we would be at Rebuild Step 5 (Grant Determination) and Step 6 (Contractor Selection) so that we could receive the temporary housing assistance from RebuildNC. Needless to say, our financial and housing need situations have not changed from September 2018! If anything, it has gotten even more challenging with the pandemic and the inflation of prices for basic needs. We have had to reach out to family and friends once again to borrow money to assist us the past few months, but they do not have unlimited resources to keep helping us.

In April 2022, we contacted our RebuildNC case manager Megan to check on the status of the Environmental Review. She said that what she could tell from the system notes, that it had moved up a level so that was a positive sign and we should know something soon. I said that we do not have any more time. We are having financial challenges due to the ineffective bureaucratic nonsense of RebuildNC. She said let's give them until the end of April to see if it is finally approved so we could move to Step 5. We called at the end of April and it was the same story. Nothing had been accomplished. I told Megan that we had had it and that we were going to contact our State of NC Rep. Steve Tyson about the matter. She asked if we would allow her to reach out to her bosses at HORNE as well as those at RebuildNC to let them know that we were very upset and that we were going to contact our elected officials. We said ok. When we called back each week for the next three weeks or so, we were told that the HORNE managers had contacted RebuildNC, but had not received any response. I said that I appreciated all that she had done for us, but that I had no choice, but to contact my elected officials.

In May 2022, I wrote an email to our elected officials, our RebuildNC case manager Megan, and several of the power brokers associated with RebuildNC. They do not make it easy to find their email addresses, but I did find them. During this time, I was also made aware of the articles that Lisa Sorg had published about what all other people had suffered at the hands of inept and possibly corrupt RebuildNC/NCCORR. <https://ncpolicywatch.com/author/lisa-sorg/> I also copied her on the email. I also copied the power brokers and case managers of the NCHAF and the NC Finance Agency as we still had not received any of the assistance promised by them. We also copied Nate Morabito, a Charlotte TV reporter, who did a report about the

NCHAF. <https://www.wcnc.com/article/money/homeowner-pandemic-program-money-charlotte-nc/275-0f50cc20-eb5e-4384-a835-e8eb5b38b4a2>

We were contacted shortly by RebuildNC as well as NCHAF. We also were contacted by the head of RebuildNC Laura Hogshead via email saying that she was now aware of our issues about our application. It is a shame that it took us having to go to our elected officials and the press to get a response. The lady from RebuildNC tried to push me off by saying that they were waiting on the NC State Historic Preservation Office (NCSHPO) to evaluate my cousin's property since it is located in an historic district and said it was going to take time. I asked how much time and she said she did not know. I asked to speak with her boss. Again, they tried to push me off. I said in my first telephone calls with RebuildNC in 2020 and 2021, I explained to them that my cousin's home was in a historic district and that it was listed as a non-contributing structure. At no point in the intervening time, we were never made aware that a NCSHPO review as part of the Environmental Inspection. Also, our RebuildNC case manager and her bosses were never made aware of this fact either! It sure appears that RebuildNC purposefully kept HORNE and us from knowing what was going on with our application. What RebuildNC did not know is that I am very familiar with NCSHPO so I called and spoke with someone in their Environmental Review Office and was told that NCSHO had NEVER received a review request about my cousin's home either by name or address. I pointed this out to the State Level RebuildNC contact and told her that she had been lied to by her superiors and in turn given us false information. This sure seems to be the MO of RebuildNC/NCCORR as it is in line with what has been reported by others in the articles by Lisa Sorg.

We were also contacted the day after by the ADA Complicate Officer with RebuildNC to go over the needs of my cousin for her home. She was very professional and helpful and said that she would be interfacing with the other RebuildNC Departments to make sure this was done properly.

We explained to everyone in the email that we could not wait any longer and something had to be done now! We also explained to RebuildNC that we must be included in the process of working with our local Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) with regard to my cousin's home. We are very familiar with their process and can greatly assist in making sure it gets done properly. We were just notified last week that RebuildNC had contacted our local HPC, but did not let us know! We are not going to put up with this serious lack of professionalism on the part of RebuildNC! Had RebuildNC done their jobs properly and notified us a year ago that NCSHPO had to be involved with the Environmental Inspection we could have moved this along at that time. They chose not to do so and it has cost us about \$20,000 in rent and storage expenses over the past year and we are probably looking at least another year before her home is complete so she can return home so that is yet another \$21,000!

We have not been contacted by the State Level of RebuildNC in over a month or more. We were contacted about a week ago from our now third RebuildNC Case Manager. She seems like a nice lady, but she has only been in her position since June of 2022 so she really has no experience to deal with the complexities of our application. RebuildNC should have never

gotten rid of the HORNE case managers as they were knowledgeable and helpful in our case.

Rep. Steve Tyson's office reached out to both RebuildNC and NCHAF on our behalf. Will Parry-Hill of NCHAF contacted RebuildNC and because of our email was able to change the guidelines for everyone in NCHAF who may need assistance who are also in RebuildNC. The RebuildNC guidelines say that if you do not have your home insurance (regular and flood) paid, mortgage currently paid, and also property taxes paid, you could be kicked out of the program. I would venture to say that most people in the RebuildNC program are like my cousin who are living on a low fixed income and because of having to pay to temporary housing and storage are also not able to keep up with all the expenses for their flooded home. If RebuildNC had done their job in a professional and timely manner, we would not have had to apply to NCHAF for assistance. These government programs need to work together. Will has been able to get our application moving forward in the NCHAF process and we appreciate his assistance. Again, it should not have required us to get our elected officials and the media involved to do so. How many people have been kicked out of the RebuildNC program who were not aware of the NCHAF. The NCHAF had never contacted our local property tax office about their program. I was the first one to inform them about the program.

We have never been folks who have had to depend upon the government for assistance, but my cousin like most ladies of her age depended upon her husband for financial security. When he passed away in 2009 he had spent most of his retirement funds on health care treatments at Duke and Chapel Hill to try to save his life. She lost almost 75% of their joint income and had a very rough time financially ever since. In 2017, she suffered a major stroke. About a month before Hurricane Florence hit, we had just gotten her home out of foreclosure and into a loan modification program that had a payment that she could make with Wells Fargo. When we are back in her home and not paying for rent and storage, she will have enough funds so that she will not need government financial assistance.

While we are of course very concerned about my cousin's situation, we are also very concerned about all the other people who are suffering. There needs to be a major revamping of the entire RebuildNC system. There also needs to be a forensic accounting investigation as to how all the taxpayer funds have been spent thus far and if there was criminal activity those people need to be brought to justice to answer for their actions.

While you can imagine, we are very frustrated and fed up with the delays, we are also about solving the issues at hand not only for ourselves, but also others in all the programs.

This whole RebuildNC program should have been structured from the beginning similar to how private insurance works. There was no reason to re-create the wheel which has now both metaphorically and literally blown out repeatedly and people are on the side of the road.

