



## Testimony

### House Appropriations Committee Work Session: Proposals to Respond to the December 2007 Floods January 29, 2008

Representative Sommers and members of the Committee, my name is Donna Christensen and I am testifying on behalf of the Washington State Catholic Conference, which represents the Catholic bishops of Washington State on public policy issues.

#### **SUBJECT: Storm and Flood Relief Recommendations**

Catholic Community Services, Archdiocesan Housing Authority (CCS/AHA) has identified key areas where assistance is needed for those who have been affected by the storms and floods in Southwest Washington.

We believe that an assessment of the needs of the affected counties would be the first priority. This could cost about \$200,000.

Although a county-wide assessment of needs of Lewis County has not been conducted, we do know that CCS/AHA has helped over 240 individuals in addition to the many flood victims that St. Joseph parish in Chehalis has helped.

CCS/AHA has had teams in the area since the devastation of the storm and flood. Their personnel are on the ground daily helping those adversely impacted. Their mission calls them to focus on the poor and this they have done. There is a clear indication that the low-income residents have been made poorer due to the impact of these disasters. Many are homeless or under-housed because their former homes have been deemed unlivable. Basic needs, in addition to shelter, are not being met and the long-term impact will be more severe if meaningful efforts, including supportive services, are not made.

In the context of the cycle of Disaster Recovery there are three phases:

1. Rescue
2. Relief
3. Recovery

As you know, the affected area is currently in the Relief Phase. This phase will continue for a while but basically most of the VOAD's service agencies (Volunteer Organizations) are trying to plan for the Recovery Phase. The Relief Phase will end in the next few months; however the salient point is that the Relief Period needs to be significantly longer for low-income needy individuals.

Recovery is not a proper term for the low-income needy because “Recovery” signifies that you are returning a family to the stable state they had before the disaster. In the “Recovery” phase the needy are in greater need than they were prior to the disaster. Most often the Relief Period for the low-income needy must be extended.

The funding for temporary housing, utility assistance, and replacement of commodities like food, clothing, transportation, work tools, and small business equipment will need to be in place longer for the low-income needy.

Currently in flood areas CCS/AHA is operating rental assistance and utility assistance programs that typically pay for the following:

1. Rental Assistance Program
  - a. Costs associated with relocating from pre-flood housing that is permanently or temporarily damaged -- 1<sup>st</sup> and last months’ rents along with various deposits for security and utilities.
  - b. Costs associated with keeping a person in the apartment where they were living at the time of the flood because the flood disrupted their income (loss of job).
  
2. Utility Assistance Program
  - a. Security Deposits for Public Utilities when relocating from a flood damaged home.
  - b. Arrearages for Public Utilities from December and January due to loss of job or reduced income due to flood.
  - c. Paying extraordinary electrical expenses incurred with drying out homes that were damaged by the flood.
  - d. Paying for extraordinary phone expenses incurred while contacting family members.

While many low-income needy may be able to return to work and/or have their hours of work returned to their pre-flood level, others will need longer term rental and utility assistance.

This Relief and beginning Recovery period will require about \$10 million.

Lewis County has lost a very significant amount of low cost owner-occupied and rental housing. Rental assistance for low income needy may need to be in place for 12 months to 24 months depending on the availability of rental housing stock and the number of low cost owner occupied housing that can be rebuilt or replaced. Without a long-term special rental program for these individuals, the low-income needy will move out of housing they can not afford and move into tents and cars as soon as it gets warmer, creating their own tent cities.

The state should establish a rental assistance program for flood victims patterned after the traditional federal rental housing assistance programs. The state program would be for flood victims and exist for 24 months. With this type of program, low-income families could be stabilized long enough for the new subsidized housing to be constructed. Income criteria should be approximately 150% higher than current standards allowing others in the community who have lost their homes but do not meet current federal income eligibility standards to obtain

housing. The payment standard should also be raised to recognize the impact of the cost of price competition in a low housing stock community. Hopefully the program could be established without jeopardizing the availability of the current federal programs or a two-year waiver could be obtained by our Congressional delegation.

Flood victims currently on the Food Stamp Program would benefit from an increased benefit funded by the federal government and/or jointly funded by the federal government and the state government to allow for the replacement of goods lost due to the flood. The amount of the increased benefit should range from 2 to 3 months of the value of the pre-flood benefits and would be paid out over a two-month period. The benefit could be easily administered through the Electronic Benefit Card currently in use in Washington. Eligibility would be based upon the ability to prove loss of housing from the flood.

The relief necessary in the area to enable long-term stability for those most adversely impacted must include supportive services. Case management services are recommended to pull together resources in order to provide stability. These resources could include mental health, health care, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, drug treatment and food stamps. Note that assistance is often needed to access the agencies that provide relief.

Without a special long-term rental assistance program, people will have nowhere to live until new subsidized housing is built. Currently CCS/AHA is paying for at least 100 families who are staying in hotels in Lewis County.

CCS/AHA would like to propose building 75-100 units of affordable housing. This would require \$15-\$20 million in development costs. Construction of these units would take between 12 and 18 months; however, CCS/AHA would employ innovative techniques to accelerate the development process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the need for housing and human services in this devastated region.