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DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

“Statement on Provisions for Disaster Victims in Third Supplemental Disaster Relief Bill”

Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)

House Floor

December 21, 2017

After Superstorm Sandy, I and others saw how leaders and volunteers at churches, synagogues, and other religious centers help feed, comfort, clothe, and shelter tens of thousands of victims—yet they were left out and left behind when it came to repairs of their own facilities. This FEMA policy was - and is- patently unfair, unjustified, and discriminatory.

That changes today.

Over four years ago the House came together in the wake of Superstorm Sandy and overwhelmingly supported and passed the legislation I authored, the Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act by a vote of 354-72. Surprise, surprise, the Senate failed to act, and as a result, FEMA has continued to deny churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship that were damaged or destroyed by disaster, access to otherwise generally available disaster relief funds.

Today’s disaster assistance bill—H.R.4667—includes my legislation to achieve fairness and nondiscrimination by ensuring that churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship are eligible for federal disaster aid administered by FEMA on an equal basis with other private non-profits.

This legislation is supported by a broad coalition of organizations who believe that the recovery of houses of worship after natural disasters is essential to the recovery of neighborhoods, towns, and States. Including:

AdvanceUSA , Agudath Israel of America , American Center for Law and Justice , Ascend, Center for Law & Religious Freedom of the Christian Legal Society, Christian Coalition of America, Christian Legal Society, Christian Medical Association, Cornerstone University, Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund, Family Research Council, First Liberty Institute, Freedom2Care, The Institute for Youth Development, Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, International Conference

of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, John Brown University, Liberty Counsel, Military–Veterans Advocacy, Religious Freedom Coalition, Republican Jewish Coalition, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Warner University

Further, today’s legislation also eliminates the misnamed and misleading “duplication of benefits” clause. This provision will ensure that victims who accepted Small Business Administration (SBA) loans early in the process are not precluded access to grant programs that are usually made available later on in a recovery.

After their home was destroyed in Superstorm Sandy, a New Jersey family applied for and received a Small Business Administration (SBA) home disaster loan. After liquidating their retirement savings and incurring a substantial tax penalty as a result, the family applied for relief through New Jersey’s Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation (RREM) Program. The family was shocked to learn of their ineligibility for a grant award solely due to their acceptance of the SBA loan—a consequence that they were never informed of during the loan process. Others in a similar predicament were also denied grants.

In response, I introduced legislation, the *Equity for Disaster Victims Act of 2017*, that goes a step further and would allow storm victims to use the grants to pay back the principal and any interest accrued on a loan, thereby ensuring that victims still only receive one means of assistance and are no longer saddled with the interest on the loan.

These provisions will go a long way toward helping communities rebuild and recover and I urge my colleagues to support this bill.

Thank you and I yield back.