

Disaster News Update –December 17 to 25, 2007

RECENT DISASTER / HAZARD ACTIVITY (Past 7 days)

- **Drought:** Oregon, California, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware
- **Earthquake:** Alaska
- **Fire:** California, Arizona, Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina, Mississippi
- **Flooding / Flash Flooding:** New York
- **HAZMAT:** New Jersey (Tire Fire), Pennsylvania (HAZMAT Truck Accident), Florida (Chemical Plant Explosion), Mississippi (Chlorine Tank Leak)
- **Ice Storm:** Pennsylvania, New York
- **Severe Winter Weather:** New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, Maine, New York, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, Minnesota, Iowa
- **Tornado:** Mississippi

CURRENT FEMA MAJOR DISASTER DECLARATIONS (Past 30 days)

- [Oklahoma](#): Severe Winter Storms (12/18)
- [Kansas](#): Severe Winter Storms (12/12 – Emergency Declaration)
- [Missouri](#): Severe Winter Storms (12/12 – Emergency Declaration)
- [Oklahoma](#): Severe Winter Storms (12/10 - Emergency Declaration)
- [Washington](#): Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides (12/8)
- [Oregon](#): Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides (12/8)
- [Indiana](#): Severe Storms and Flooding (11/30)
- Fire Declarations: [New Mexico \(11/21\)](#)

VOLUNTEER PROGRAM NEWS

First response: Vehicle will help volunteers handle emergencies (Tulsa World, 12/19)

Glenpool's new \$50,000 first responder vehicle will enable the team of medical volunteers to handle emergencies in all types of inclement weather. Keith Robinson, Glenpool city councilor and organizer of the city's first responder program, said the city now has a 2007 Chevy Suburban in addition to its other first responder car. "It's great, especially with the weather the way it is. We wouldn't have been able to get to them last year. We can maneuver around the city better and keep patients out of the cold," said volunteer Kim Robinson, Keith Robinson's wife. First responders are trained medical volunteers who are summoned to an emergency at the same time the ambulance service is called. First responders are there to assist ambulance crews with emergencies or to administer medical care until an ambulance crew arrives. Robinson said he started the program 15 years ago, when the city's ambulance service was based in Tulsa. The ambulance response time was 15 to 20 minutes, so Robinson created the volunteer program to attend to medical emergencies more quickly. "When they page the ambulance, it simultaneously pages us. We usually arrive ahead of the ambulance," he

said. The city's nine first responder volunteers choose their own schedule for the week. They have undergone 48 hours of medical training and can administer the same basic medical services as an ambulance medic. First responders do not transport patients to area medical facilities. The new first responder vehicle is designed to resemble an emergency vehicle. Extra space added to the back end of the truck allows patients to be loaded and attended to out of the elements and out of the way of traffic.

COMMUNITY PROGRAM NEWS

Group offers plan to assist evacuees (The Advocate, 12/21)

A group of Katrina evacuees living in Renaissance Village FEMA trailer park near Baker took an unusual step recently when they unveiled a plan to help themselves move out of the park and into more-permanent housing. Now comes the hard part: making it happen. The 17-point plan calls on charities and federal agencies to work together to help the park's 350-plus families move out of the cramped travel trailers and into apartments and houses. The plan ranges from basic requests such as providing more housing case workers at the trailer park, to more-complicated suggestions such as reforming the way FEMA and the state help hurricane evacuees. Among the suggestions in the plan are to create one-stop housing and job centers at the trailer park, and to make sure those centers are places where federal agencies, state agencies and charities work together. The plan also seeks commitments from communities across the country to welcome a specific number of park residents. Cities already using the federal disaster housing assistance program would be approached first. The residents also want more time to move out of a trailer after a new address is secured, and want to reduce the waiting period for the payment of moving assistance. The residents have formed a coalition with clergy, volunteers and elected officials, and their announced goal is to move every Renaissance Village resident into permanent housing. "Not just into permanent housing, but dignified, affordable housing for each individual," said park resident Arcenia Crayton, a coalition leader who helped draft the plan. "Because what may be affordable for me may not be affordable for the next person." The plan was sparked, in part, by FEMA's June 1 deadline to close the trailer park, the agency's largest group site in the Baton Rouge area.

Students Hit By Storm to Get Tuition Break (Seattle Post Intelligencer, 12/20)

Washington community college students who also are storm victims won't have to pay tuition for the next two quarters. The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges voted Wednesday to give aid to students affected by the early December storms and resulting flooding and power outages. The policy applies to two-year colleges in the disaster areas declared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Two-year colleges affected by the tuition waivers are Centralia College, Grays Harbor College, Olympic College and South Puget Sound Community College. Students will be given a break for winter and spring quarters of 2008. Two years ago, the college board waived the out-of-state tuition differentials for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Program Will Train Seniors to Help Their Neighbors (Palm Beach Post, 12/19)

When Martin Volunteers started their new project to help seniors, they thought it would be easy. They thought they could go to the county and ask for a list of all the 55-plus communities in the county. They were wrong. "There's no list anywhere within the county," said Walter Sawyer, who was chosen as the volunteer to lead the Warm Hearts, Willing Hands project. Sawyer has spent his time creating the list from which the group members will choose six low- to medium-income senior communities in which they will find and train 10 volunteers to help people with special needs. Sawyer is paid a stipend to help get the project started, and the volunteers will help get emergency information into the communities. "A program like this would be a great benefit," said Keith Holman, the county's emergency management director. "A high percentage of Martin County's population is 65-plus, and getting information out to these people is very important." The concept is neighbors helping neighbors, and Martin Volunteers wants to develop a core group of volunteers in senior communities to help one another and provide information on services that are available. Volunteers will review or help create community emergency plans, and they will go door-to-door to check on neighbors with special needs. Volunteers also will call neighbors to check on them. "This will happen on a regular basis," Sawyer said. "It's up to people in the community to keep it working."

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY NEWS

NM families have until Feb. to move from FEMA trailers (Associated Press, 12/25)

This Christmas marks the second that Carmen Maria Morales and her family have spent in a mobile home park constructed by the federal government to house residents displaced by a severe flood in the Hatch Valley. But this is likely the last Christmas that Morales will spend in her 60-foot trailer. FEMA is holding to a requirement that calls for families to move out of the mobile home park by Feb. 28 18 months after the flood. Earl Armstrong, a regional spokesman for the agency, said 45 mobile homes are occupied and FEMA is trying to help those residents find other places to live before February. "We are looking for ways to help those folks as that deadline gets closer," he said. Asked if she's worried about the deadline, Morales nodded. The market for rental units remains slim. "They're finishing fixing the houses in Hatch," she said, adding that she's continuing to search for a new place to live. Morales, her husband and their five children moved into the mobile home in December 2006. Like many of their neighbors at the park, the family once lived in an apartment complex on the northern edge of Hatch, just a few miles to the north of the mobile home park in Rincon.

Weekend Storm Leaves Deadly Toll (Disaster News Network, 12/24)

Christmas lights were expected to be on throughout Oklahoma as power was restored to nearly all utility customers left in the dark for more than a week after a winter ice storm blanketed the nation's midsection. But as power returned to parts of Oklahoma and Kansas, the fourth consecutive major weekend storm was responsible for plunging thousands of other homes into the dark and being blamed for major traffic accidents from Texas to Wisconsin. The powerful winter storm blanketed much of the area with heavy snow and blizzard conditions and heavy fog socked-in major airports. At least 19 deaths

were blamed on the storm, which caused numerous traffic accidents – including many multi-vehicle pileups that forced the closure of portions of interstates in Kansas, Missouri and Texas - and bogged down Christmas holiday air traffic. At the peak of the storm more than 225,000 homes were without power Sunday in Wisconsin, Michigan and Illinois after the combination of ice and high winds knocked down power lines. Winds were clocked at nearly 90 mph across Lake Michigan and wind gusts between 50 and 68 mph across the Chicago area were responsible for hundreds of flight cancellations. Weekend snowfall stretched from Minnesota to Oklahoma and winter storm warnings, watches and advisories were posted across the Midwest. The severe weather was blamed on several multi-car accidents. At least one death was reported in a chain-reaction accident including as many as 50 cars and trucks on Interstate 40 in Texas. A 30-car pileup on I-70 in Kansas was also blamed for one death. More than 40 miles of that Interstate was closed as a result of the snowstorm while police in Missouri closed about 100 miles of I-29 following another wreck that included dozens of vehicles.

SoCal wildfire aid reaches \$114 million (Associated Press, 12/23)

Officials say about \$114 million in state and federal aid have been doled out following the wildfires that ripped through Southern California in the past two months. Currently, 18,605 Californians have registered for state and federal disaster assistance. Nearly 15,000 FEMA registrants have visited assistance centers seeking disaster recovery help. So far about 8,139 FEMA inspections have been completed in disaster-designated counties. The deadline to apply for federal and state disaster assistance is Jan. 9.

Fund to help tornado victims rebuild tops a half-million dollars (AP, 12/23)

A fund set up to help victims of an October tornado rebuild their lives has attracted more than a half million dollars in donations, officials said. The Nappanee Tornado Victims Fund has raised \$541,000 just short of the \$600,000 goal for victims of the Oct. 18 storm. "The generosity of the people in the area as far as making donations is overwhelming," Nappanee Mayor Larry Thompson said Friday. October's tornado destroyed 51 homes in the northern Indiana city of fewer than 7,000 people, while 137 homes had major damage and 201 had minor damage from the storm. More than 100 businesses sustained damage, including three recreational vehicle plants that are among Nappanee's largest employers. FEMA last month denied a request for federal aid for residents affected by the storm. FEMA said damage to the private sector wasn't severe enough to warrant a major disaster declaration and assistance. Earlier this month, officials sent an appeal to FEMA. Thompson is hoping for an answer to the appeal by the end of the year. Donations for the city's relief fund have come from a variety of sources. The Elkhart County Community Foundation sent out about 700 letters asking for contributions. These letters brought in numerous donations, some as high as \$10,000.

Kansas digs itself out from another winter storm (Associated Press, 12/23)

Numerous roads remained slick and treacherous Sunday after a winter storm dumped more than a half foot of snow across parts of the state. The storm brought whiteout conditions that caused dozens of accidents, including a 30-car pileup that claimed one life Saturday on Interstate 70 near McFarland, about 30 miles west of Topeka. A 40-mile stretch of I-70 from Manhattan to Topeka didn't reopen until late Saturday. The storm

also closed several other roads Saturday, including a portion of U.S. 24 west of Rossville after a 10-car pileup around 1:50 p.m. No serious injuries were reported, according to the Shawnee County sheriff's officials. Elsewhere in the state, Sedgwick County dispatchers took about 175 accident calls from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, said DeAnn Konkell, community liaison program manager for public safety and emergency management for Sedgwick County. None were serious, she said. The heaviest snow accumulations of 9 to 11 inches fell in a 40- to 50-mile-wide band that stretched from southwest of Wichita through Topeka and continued until just west of St. Joseph, Mo.

More Counties Added To Oregon Declaration (FEMA, 12/21)

Oregon Emergency Management (OEM) and FEMA announced that individuals and families in Washington County are now eligible to register with FEMA for disaster assistance. Coos and Curry counties, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz and Grand Ronde in Polk and Yamhill Counties are now eligible for Public Assistance. With the addition of Washington County, there are six Oregon counties eligible for individual assistance for the effects of severe storms, flooding, landslides and mudslides of Dec.1-17. In addition to individuals and families in Washington County, individuals and families in Columbia, Clatsop, Polk, Tillamook, and Yamhill counties are also eligible for Individual Assistance. Individual assistance, to be coordinated by OEM and FEMA, may include grants to help pay for temporary housing, home repairs and other serious disaster-related expenses. Low-interest loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) will also be available to cover residential and business losses not fully compensated by insurance. Washington County had already received federal disaster declarations authorizing full Public Assistance to local governments for damages from the December 1-17 severe weather. Coos and Curry counties and the Siletz and Grande Ronde tribes are in addition to Clatsop, Columbia, Lincoln, Polk, Tillamook, and Yamhill counties which were previously declared for Public Assistance.

Greensburg officials push for building improved, greener city (AP, 12/21)

As Greensburg rebuilds from a tornado last spring, city officials are envisioning a greener, more efficient town. With 200 new homes being built, City Administrator Steve Hewitt is urging residents to support improved city infrastructure and more environmentally friendly structures in the southwestern Kansas town. Greensburg leaders spoke to residents at a community meeting Thursday, updating them on the progress made rebuilding the town almost wiped out by the May 4 tornado. Kansas City, Mo.-based BNIM Architects, hired by Greensburg to design the city's master plan, presented its work. Hewitt said Greensburg could become a model city for the country. "We truly do have opportunities, and we must embrace those opportunities," Hewitt said. "This community's coming back." FEMA pays 75 percent for projects to bring infrastructure back to what it was before the tornado, but the city wants to be bigger, better and more progressive, Hewitt said. "We're not going to build it the way it was before," he said. Hewitt said the city already plans to build a bigger water tower, because the one damaged held only 55,000 gallons and didn't serve the needs of the fire department. The tower is one of 75 city projects. BNIM's plan includes a conceptual design scheme for downtown, streetscape design guidelines for signature streets, such as Main Street and U.S. 54, and a comprehensive land use guide. Darin Headrick, superintendent of the city's schools, said

about 74 percent of the district's population is back to school in Greensburg. But it's crucial to get housing for Greensburg's families so children can return to the district, he said. Now housed in trailers, classrooms will be rebuilt to have state-of-the-art technology, Headrick said. "One thing we're really doing is making sure we design these classrooms from the inside out. We want to make sure each individual learner" has the best environment, he said. Residents at the meeting later broke into small groups to discuss their ideas for Greensburg's future.

Disagreement over pace of flood aid to southeastern Minn. (Associated Press, 12/21)

A lawmaker criticized state agencies Friday for not getting flood aid to southeastern Minnesota faster, but three state commissioners said the money is flowing quicker than ever. Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes a Democrat from Winona who represents the state's southeastern corner said she has been getting complaints from constituents who are still waiting for grants and loans from the state. Flooding in August killed seven, damaged thousands of homes and caused millions in damage. Within weeks, lawmakers approved almost \$160 million in flood aid in a special session. "I can't believe it's been four months," Erickson Ropes said. She added: "I have families back home who still have shelled out homes." But the heads of three state agencies said much of the money has already been committed and checks are going out as local authorities get their paperwork in. Dan McElroy, who heads the Department of Employment and Economic Development, said putting together the applications takes some doing. "This is the fastest response to a natural disaster like a flood in Minnesota history," McElroy said. Meanwhile, a \$3.7 million fund for farmers in flood and drought areas has been on hold because there weren't many applications from the flood areas, said Agriculture Commissioner Gene Hugoson. The deadline was pushed back so the agency could send postcards reminding farmers to apply for the aid. Some counties are also waiting for federal aid that was delayed because they didn't have the required disaster plans in place. Minnesota Sens. Norm Coleman and Amy Klobuchar and Rep. Tim Walz asked FEMA to waive that requirement, and on Friday, Coleman said FEMA asked the state to formally submit a waiver request, which should speed up the aid.

People keeping busy, picking up pieces (Topeka (KS) Capital Journal, 12/20)

Westar Energy expects the cost of restoring power to its customers following last week's ice storm will top its previous record for one storm. Gina Penzig, Westar spokeswoman, said the company spent \$38 million recovering from a 2005 ice storm in the Wichita area and company officials think the cost of this storm will easily exceed that amount. Many organizations incurred extra expense in dealing with the storm and none can offer accurate estimates of their costs, yet. In Shawnee County, the cost to all units of government - cities, townships and the county government - likely will be more than \$500,000, according to David Sterbenz, Shawnee County director of emergency management. If the figure reaches \$528,000, the cities, townships and county government in Shawnee County may be eligible for federal help. Receiving the federal aid depends on more than that figure, though, he added. It assumes the cost of service to the state as a whole reaches a certain level, which he believes it will. In calculating the costs to qualify for federal aid, the county counts an hourly cost for the use of equipment, overtime for employees and the cost of hiring additional people for the work. If the state

and the county qualify, the units of government will be reimbursed for 75 percent of their expenditures. And in some disasters in the past, the state has added another 15 percent to the federal government's reimbursement. Sterbenz said the greatest storm-related expenditures likely will be by the city of Topeka because of its size and population. But, he said, the most intense damage in the county seems to have been in the northwest corner, around Rossville.

Storm damage tops \$4 million; still tallying (The Oregonian, 12/20)

The high winds and flooding that battered the Northwest earlier this month caused more than \$4 million in damage to Washington County roads, bridges and other public infrastructure, officials say. The good news, however, is that the federal government will reimburse the county at least 75 percent of the costs of overtime, equipment and repair, according to Cleo Howell, a spokesman for the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Two roads remain closed and at least four bridges are badly damaged. Although that has caused inconvenience, particularly for commercial trucks, people didn't lose access to their homes, said Dave Schamp, county road operations and maintenance manager. "We've got significant damage," Schamp said, "but we're really fortunate it occurred where it did." The \$4 million includes \$3.2 million in identified damage plus another \$1 million in anticipated damage, he said. In addition, the Oregon Department of Forestry estimates \$1.2 million in damage to its roads, campsites and trails within the county. Other miscellaneous costs --such as city streets in Forest Grove or service interruptions at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center --will push the total inside Washington County past \$5.7 million. Estimates from the Oregon Department of Transportation were not included. Hardest hit was the northwest part of the county. Landslides closed Cochran Road, northwest of Timber, and Pottratz Road north of North Plains.

Rural customers still in dark 10 days after storm (Associated Press, 12/19)

Going on their 10th day without electricity, and living on cans of soup and tea, Richard and Siobhan Smith wondered if the power company passed them by. "Ten days without power in America? My family can't believe it," said Richard Smith, who moved here about a year ago from southern California. "This is not on the news." The Smiths were among the tens of thousands still without power Tuesday, more than a week after a brutal ice storm plowed through the state, knocking out electricity to more than 600,000 homes and businesses and toppling trees onto homes, cars and streets. President Bush issued a major disaster declaration Tuesday for seven Oklahoma counties that suffered serious ice storm damage, clearing the way for federal funds to reimburse state and local government for cleanup and infrastructure repairs in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Pottawatomie, Wagoner, Cleveland, Lincoln and Mayes counties. In this rural community about 30 miles northwest of Tulsa, where many homes sit on several acres and your next-door neighbor could be a good hike away, some residents believe the power companies have forgotten about them.

President Declares Major Disaster For Oklahoma (FEMA, 12/18)

FEMA announced that federal disaster aid has been made available for the state of Oklahoma to supplement state and local recovery efforts in the area struck by severe winter storms beginning on December 8, 2007, and continuing. FEMA Administrator

David Paulison said the assistance was authorized under a major disaster declaration issued for the state by President Bush. The President's action makes federal funding available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency work and the repair or replacement of facilities damaged by the severe storms, tornadoes, and flooding in Cleveland, Lincoln, Mayes, Oklahoma, Pottawatomie, Tulsa, and Wagoner counties. Federal funding is also available on a cost-sharing basis for hazard mitigation measures for all counties and tribes within the state. Paulison named Philip E. Parr as the federal coordinating officer for federal recovery operations in the affected area. Parr said damage surveys have been scheduled and more counties and additional forms of assistance may be designated after the assessments are completed.

Ice storm damages up to \$2.3 million (Associated Press, 12/18)

New figures show about \$2.3 million in damages from last week's ice storm in southeast Nebraska. It's more than double the figure released last week, which didn't include damage in Falls City, the area hardest hit by the storm that began last Monday. Utility crews there finished most of their work Sunday night, and utility Superintendent Alan Romine said many crews put in 16-hour days. Crews from Lincoln Electric System, Beatrice and Crete have been helping to restore electricity in Falls City. At one point, most of the people in the town of nearly 5,000 were without power. Gov. Dave Heineman issued a state emergency proclamation, which allows the state to provide financial and other assistance to local entities. Heineman also asked that a joint assessment be done with FEMA to see if the area meets the requirements for federal disaster aid.

PREPAREDNESS AND MITIGATION NEWS

DHS Provides Nearly \$34M to 1st Responders in Smaller Communities (DHS, 12/20)

DHS announced the award of \$33.7 million to fund equipment and training for first responders across the nation as a part of the fiscal year 2007 Commercial Equipment Direct Assistance Program (CEDAP). Since the program's inception in 2005, DHS has provided roughly 5,800 direct assistance awards worth more than \$103 million for all hazards in smaller jurisdictions nationwide. "Local police and emergency personnel are the first on the scene of any incident, and often the cause is not immediately known," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "This direct funding equips first responders with technology and training to complement local resources, and helps communities develop tools and capabilities that they may not otherwise be able to afford." Eligibility for CEDAP is limited to law enforcement and other emergency responder agencies with specific financial and capability needs in five categories: personal protective equipment; thermal imaging, night vision and video surveillance tools; chemical and biological detection tools; information technology and risk management tools; and interoperable communications equipment. CEDAP equipment awards are integrated with state planning processes for regional response and asset distribution. Each state's administrative agency has the opportunity to review applications submitted by first responder organizations within their state to ensure that equipment requests are consistent with their state homeland security strategy.

City in disaster response project (Buffalo News, 12/19)

The City of Buffalo will be one of three cities nationwide participating in a pilot project in 2008 to establish the National Blueprint for local disaster preparedness and response, according to Mayor Byron W. Brown. The mayor briefed reporters on the project Tuesday evening at Buffalo Niagara International Airport after returning from a two-day forum sponsored by the National Congress for Secure Communities. "We're very pleased Buffalo was asked to be a pilot community," Brown said. "It's important for communities to be prepared for natural disasters. Local communities are the first responders. They are at ground zero, so to speak." Representatives from the National Congress and from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government will be providing technical support and other assistance to the city during the ReadyCommunity Partnership project designed to refine the community's planned response to disaster situations, according to Brown. The project will further the development of the National Blueprint, which is "a dynamic framework for disaster response based on input from private industry . . . and government." The project identifies the challenges facing communities during the first 72 hours of crisis, the best practices to address those challenges and the tools that can increase response and hasten recovery. Two communities, Galveston, Texas, and Charleston, S.C., already participated in the project. Others will include the Detroit area and Hamilton County, Ind., near Indianapolis. "These issues have become critical," Brown said. "You never know when some kind of disaster will hit."

Web site on federal grants, loans and contracts debuts (GovExec.Com, 12/17)

The Office of Management and Budget rolled out a new Web site Thursday that will provide information on all major federal grants, loans and contracts. The new site, dubbed USASpending.gov, is dedicated to improving transparency by providing the public with information on all major federal transactions. The launch fulfills one of the key requirements of the 2006 Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, which requires full disclosure on a Web site maintained by OMB of all organizations receiving more than \$25,000 in federal funds. Sens. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Tom Coburn, R-Okla., co-sponsors of the legislation, applauded the announcement, which Obama called "an important milestone on the path to great government transparency." "We can't reduce waste, fraud and abuse without knowing how, where and why federal money is flowing out the door," Obama said. "This site will provide a window into the federal budget so all Americans can see how their tax dollars are being spent."

GULF COAST RECOVERY NEWS

Residents jump hurdles on path to permanent housing (NO Times Picayune, 12/23)

Sometimes, all you want for Christmas is a place to call home. According to FEMA, there are 52,047 people still living in trailers along the Gulf Coast. Over the past two years, I've interviewed dozens of them. And, while FEMA says it is committed to placing people in trailers in permanent housing, most trailer residents I've talked to have found that moving on isn't that easy. The path to affordable, available housing, they say, is lined with the same bureaucratic roadblocks we've all come to know and hate: government

telephone numbers that are out of service, voice mailboxes that are full, phone calls that are never returned, forms to send in, notices that go up while occupants are at work. Meanwhile, area rental rates remain high -- the cheapest apartment he can find, one trailer resident told me, would cost half his monthly salary. I recently revisited five people I have previously written about, all living in FEMA trailers at the time they were interviewed. I wanted to put a face on the FEMA trailer dilemma. I chose them randomly, not knowing when I made the calls where life had taken them since our initial meetings, most more than a year ago. These are families accustomed to solving their own problems, perplexed by the need to look to government for a helping hand. They are men and women who paid their taxes and insurance policies, held down steady jobs and, in many cases, gave tirelessly to their communities. Now, many of them are financially and emotionally drained after two years of fighting red tape.

Scuffles in New Orleans as council approves housing demolition (AP, 12/21)

Police used chemical spray and stun guns Thursday on protesters who tried to force their way into a City Council meeting, the latest strife over plans to demolish some 4,500 public housing units in a redevelopment project that council members ended up unanimously supporting. The vote to permit the federal government to tear down four public housing developments was a critical moment in a protracted fight between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and residents, activists and preservationists. Police said 15 people were arrested on charges ranging from battery to disorderly conduct. Four people were taken to hospitals two of them women who had been stunned with Tasers and five others were injured and treated on the scene, police said. All four in the hospital were stable, police said. Protesters said they pushed against the iron gates that kept them out of the building because the Housing Authority of New Orleans had disproportionately allowed supporters of the demolition to pack the chambers. Dozens tried to force their way in. At the peak of the confusion, some 70 protesters were facing about a dozen mounted police and 40 more law enforcement officers on foot.

FEMA to finance work at five school sites (New Orleans Times Picayune, 12/20)

A backhoe tore into a crumbling building Wednesday on the future campus of a new high-tech academy in New Orleans, an early step in a plan to build and renovate five schools that will open in September 2009. The five schools are an attempt to show progress in a city where shuttered buildings still languish after the 2005 flood, and to jump-start a facilities master plan expected to be done in the spring. The master plan will change the landscape of what once was a singular system of about 130 campuses. That means some campuses will remain as schools, while others could be redeveloped or possibly sold for use as offices, condos or community centers. FEMA will cover the more than \$120 million in construction costs of the five schools. But city and state officials still must solve the looming issue of how to find other financing to implement a master plan that could cost "well over a billion dollars," said Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas. Education and city officials, including Mayor Ray Nagin, hailed the work at Lake Area Middle School as a sign of progress in the city's beleaguered education system.

Critics: FEMA decision hurt Louisiana recovery (Associated Press, 12/19)

A week after Hurricane Katrina, a FEMA official in charge of streamlining the flow of disaster aid issued a directive that would have cut through the red tape and expedited a staggering 1,029 rebuilding projects and \$5.3 billion. The official issued a memo that said that once local and regional FEMA officials approved a project, Washington must release the money within three days. But in a decision critics say led to the loss of precious time in New Orleans' recovery, FEMA higher-ups countermanded the order. Instead, the rebuilding of schools, roads, hospitals and other desperately needed infrastructure was held up for months of interagency reviews that ended at the White House Office of Management and Budget. Gil Jamieson, FEMA's head of Gulf Coast recovery and one of the officials who countermanded the directive of Nancy Ward, said her order would have given federal agencies too little time to review requests for funding. However, despite FEMA's contention that added layers of review would save taxpayer dollars, not a single rebuilding project was amended, declared ineligible or kicked back for further scrutiny, federal officials acknowledge. Ward, who was promoted later to West Coast director of FEMA, stands by the policy she issued on Sept. 6, 2005. She was FEMA's Louisiana-based director of recovery command. "We knew given the enormity of Katrina that we needed to get the money out quickly," said Ward, who was contacted after The Associated Press found her memo on the Web site of the Louisiana legislative auditor. The procedure Ward wanted to shorten involves FEMA's "million-dollar queue," a basket in its computer system. It was created in 2000, when FEMA was an independent cabinet-level agency, to handle projects of \$1 million or more.