



LINA HIDALGO

Testimony of Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo

Hearing Before United States House Financial Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

“CDBG Disaster Recovery: States, Cities, and Denials of Funding”

July 15, 2021

Congressman Green, Ranking Member Emmer, thank you for inviting me here today.

On behalf of the people of Harris County, I want to express my sincere gratitude for calling this hearing and for your work to reform vital programs our community depends on to recover from disasters.

I'd like to begin my testimony by sharing with you the story of Sergeant Steve Perez, a veteran of the Houston Police Department.

On the morning of Sunday, August 27, as Hurricane Harvey began its slow and deadly march over Harris County, Sergeant Perez did what thousands of other brave first responders did during the storm - he went to work. With rain barreling down across our county, his wife Cheryl, concerned about the weather, asked Sgt. Perez to stay home.

But Sergeant Perez - as he did each day of his 34 years at HPD - chose duty above all and went to work anyway, knowing that the people of Harris County needed his service, particularly as Hurricane Harvey began to take hold.

When he did not arrive for his regular roll call the next day, his fellow officers grew worried and began a search. Not long after, they found Sgt. Perez in his patrol vehicle. He had drowned in flood waters under an underpass near the Hardy Toll Road and Beltway 8, just two days away from his 61st birthday.

The tragic loss of Sergeant Perez, who was described as “a sweet, gentle public servant,” was just one of the 68 fatalities from Hurricane Harvey statewide, 36 of which occurred right here in Harris County.

As our county's Chief Executive, and as our county's chief emergency manager, I have seen first-hand the heartbreaking devastation our communities are still reeling from since Hurricane Harvey struck in 2017. While the daily national media attention has faded, today, there are still thousands of families suffering in silence. Businesses that have not recovered, homeowners, renters and neighborhoods, all yearning to benefit from long term mitigation projects before the next flood strikes. Yet, due to CDBG disaster programs mired in red tape, complexity, and uncertainty, millions of our residents - particularly vulnerable ones - continue to feel abandoned and frustrated.

Harris County bore the majority of fatalities in Texas due to Hurricane Harvey. We also suffered the most damage compared to any other jurisdiction in our state. More than half (around 154,000) of the roughly 300,000 homes damaged or destroyed across the state during Harvey were in Harris County. Each of those structures has a family or a story, a lifetime of wealth built up in it, a family business unique to our county, or a workplace on which people rely to make a living. And Harvey is not the only major storm to affect Harris County. Harris County has experienced four 500-year storms in a period of just five years.

Harris County is a big county with roughly five million people and the geographic size of the state of Rhode Island. Not only are we the largest jurisdiction in Texas, but we, along with the City of Houston, are also the economic engine for much of the Southwestern U.S, and the epicenter of our national energy infrastructure. For example, the Harris County region employs nearly a third of the nation's jobs in oil and gas extraction and is home to 4,600 energy-related companies. When disasters strike our region, lives and property are at risk, and so is the vital infrastructure that supports our economy.

Yet despite our past losses, despite our growing risk in the face of climate change, and despite the national importance of our critical infrastructure, our county received zero CDBG mitigation funds in the latest round of funding administered by the State of Texas General Land Office. Some smaller cities within Harris County received around \$90 million in total for smaller projects, but those funds do not come anywhere close to meeting our countywide need or expectation for federal funds.

In response, I have joined Mayor Sylvester Turner of the City of Houston in asking HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge for certainty in an allocation and for a review of the criteria used. I have also expressed those two goals to members of our Congressional delegation. First, the GLO must make the \$750 million direct allocation to Harris County it has announced publicly, which we view as an initial "down payment" relative to what our community needs. Second, the City of Houston and Harris County must each receive at least \$1 billion in CDBG-MIT funds. We ask that HUD approve the portion of the GLO's Action Plan amendment that pertains to the \$750 million for Harris County, but reject the flawed allocations.

The Harris County Flood Control District acts as the flood control district for all cities within our county, and approximately half of my constituents are residents of the City of Houston. I want to stress that Harris County supports the City of Houston in its efforts to obtain its own funds. I must also note that, if approved by HUD, the projects proposed in the current Action Plan for the \$750M are focused on LMI areas of the County, and around half the funding would go to projects located within the City of Houston.



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CDBG-MIT funds are a lifeline for the long term health of Harris County. We are doing our part by supporting billions of dollars in projects through our local flood bond, but our federal and state partners must do their part.

In addition to this recent debacle with the CDBG-MIT program, the CDBG-DR program has also been a source of trauma and frustration for our residents, as it has been for so many other grantees across the nation. Particularly when it comes to programs like the Homeowner Assistance and Reimbursement Programs, which are designed to help and protect vulnerable and low income individuals and families from future disasters. Unlike FEMA funds, which flow quickly and with certainty in the hours after a declared disaster, CDBG-DR funds take years to reach survivors, with no certainty as to how much or when funds will arrive. Each grantee has a different way of administering the funds and the funds are mired in delays as rules are developed for each grantee, RFP's are written, and other statutory delays are factored in. There is no intuitive or standard way for survivors to sign up for help, required documentation is burdensome and varies, and previous assistance that residents received from non-profit groups in the meantime are eventually counted against them. The bottom line is that CDBG-DR funds are treated as routine federal grant programs instead of what they should be: emergency funds that survivors and local officials need quickly, fairly and with certainty.

Let me be frank: When it comes to flood control or flood recovery relief, the people of Harris County don't care about action plans, or appropriations, or competition rules, or which agency is the source of funds. They care about results. That's why we'll continue to fight for every dollar we can receive, regardless of where it comes from, and to advocate for aid to come quickly after disaster strikes.

With that, I am happy to take any questions you might have.