

## Lack of data complicates getting help to Sandy victims

By DONNA WEAVER Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 4, 2014 5:29 pm

The state has not tracked the number of people displaced after Hurricane Sandy, and a firm figure of that population remains elusive two years after the storm drove so many from their homes.

“DCA is not in a position to track every individual who remains displaced by Sandy. To our knowledge, there is no state or federal agency that is tracking this data,” said Lisa Ryan, spokeswoman for the state Department of Community Affairs.

However, housing advocates say this lack of data makes it impossible to determine if everyone affected by the storm is getting the assistance they need.

“If there are people who are displaced and we don't know where they are they also don't have any way of knowing what assistance is available to them,” said Adam Grossman, an attorney for the Fair Share Housing Center.

Gov. Chris Christie spoke out in January 2013 and pointed to 41,000 storm-affected families in New Jersey who remained displaced from their homes while he called for the Sandy aid bill to pass quickly through Congress.

During his annual State of the State address in January 2013, Christie said New Jersey waited 72 days, seven times longer than victims of Hurricane Katrina waited, for federal aid.

Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak said early on after Hurricane Sandy, it was reasonably easy to estimate the population that was displaced by the storm, but even then it wasn't completely accurate. At that time, the state could reliably count the number of people receiving housing assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“As time went on, it became more difficult to track people, especially as funding winded down, and since there became no way to count those who were (or) are living with family, friends or other accommodations,” Drewniak said.



Hurricane Sandy Tuesday

The south Inlet of Atlantic City after Hurricane Sandy Tuesday Oct. 30, 2012.

Less than one year after Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Census Bureau completed a report that determined 400,000 were displaced after that storm.

In 2005, two special datasets to track the displaced population were created for inclusion in the report for Hurricane Katrina — one was for January to August 2005 before the hurricane hit, and the other was September to December 2005, and the report compared the two. The same wasn't done for Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The author of the Katrina report didn't know why this wasn't done, said Robert Bernstein, spokesman for the U.S. Census Bureau.

Bernstein said researchers had trouble compiling the post-storm data for the Katrina report and likely would have faced similar problems if they had attempted to compile data on the displaced population post-Sandy

Similar to New Jersey's response in tracking the storm-affected homeless, no Louisiana state agency was tasked with tracking the displaced population after Hurricane Katrina, said Angela Vanveckhoven, spokeswoman for the Louisiana Office of Community Development.

The Louisiana Recovery Authority produced a report in 2007 that included information about the population shift after Hurricane Katrina. Since then, Louisiana has used data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Internal Revenue Service to track displaced population data, Vanveckhoven said.

The Data Center, a private, independent agency, has done a lot of research about the New Orleans population changes after Hurricane Katrina, she said.

Vanveckhoven said she has learned that tracking this information can be tricky, because who has or hasn't come back into the state after a hurricane cannot always be directly linked to the storms and their effects.

“Population increases post-disaster don't necessarily reflect that those people who were displaced have returned,” she said.

Grossman, attorney for the Fair Share Housing Center, said he does not understand why no state or federal agency has an accurate number of people who never returned home after the storm.

Fair Share Housing Center, founded in 1975 and based in Cherry Hill, is devoted to defending the housing rights of New Jersey's poor through implementing the Mount Laurel doctrine, which requires each municipality to provide its fair share of housing affordable to low- and moderate-income people.

Grossman said storm displacement affected the lower-income population more severely, and they are the group most likely to be displaced the farthest.

This population does not seem to be a priority for the state of New Jersey and the Christie administration, Grossman said.

“Things were set up so poorly and we’re still trying to dig ourselves out of that hole. It’s also possible that if they had the data that shows thousands of people are still displaced after the storm that would look really bad. I think the other reason is that they are just incompetent, and they don’t know what they’re doing,” he said.

*Contact Donna Weaver:*

609-513-6686

DWeaver@pressofac.com

*@DonnaKWeaver on Twitter*