

Sweeney introduces bill to help Sandy victims waiting for money

Written by Michael Feely Thursday, March 12, 2015 www.shorenewstoday.com

Senate President Stephen Sweeney introduced legislation this week to increase the efficiency, transparency and accountability in the disbursement of aid to the tens of thousands of New Jersey residents whose lives were upended by Superstorm Sandy.

“It has been more than two years since Congress passed Sandy aid, and we still have at least 15,000 families waiting to rebuild,” Sweeney said. “The problems with the Sandy relief programs are well-documented, and the people who have been hurt are residents whose homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed. They were victims of the storm, and then they were victimized by the aid process.”

Sweeney, whose “Sandy Bill of Rights” was vetoed by the governor last year, said his new bill would require the state Department of Community Affairs to provide an individualized timeline for each homeowner showing when they can expect to receive assistance through the Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, Elevation and Mitigation program.

“Those who have been trying to get the help they need to put their lives back together need to know where their applications are in the process, how much aid they’re going to get, and when they’re going to get it,” Sweeney said. “This legislation will help make government more responsive by bringing more transparency and accountability to the process.”

Under the legislation, the Department of Community Affairs would be required to publish that information on an easy-to-access website so homeowners can follow the progress of their paperwork.

The bill would also require the DCA to set quarterly goals for the distribution of Sandy aid and to report to the governor and the Legislature on whether unused federal Community Development Block Grant Disaster Relief funds can be reallocated to assist families who need the help.

“Too many victims are still forced to wade through piles of paperwork from FEMA, the state and insurance companies,” said Sweeney. “They have different caseworkers from various agencies involved in the recovery, which adds to the confusion and the difficulty. They deserve real answers and real help.”

The legislation has three main components: a timeline for distributing remaining funding, both broadly and for each individual RREM applicant; a website that includes a plain-language explanation of each recovery program and a clear application process; and enhanced reporting as to uses and availability of Superstorm Sandy funding.

“The transparency aspects of this legislation are critical,” Latino Action Network President Frank Argote-Freyre said. “Renters and homeowners impacted by Sandy deserve clear answers on

when they can expect recovery funding, and Senator Sweeney's legislation would help them get it."

A link to Sweeney's proposal and a bill fact sheet can be accessed at www.njsendems.org/.