

South Jersey Sandy recovery offices closing this spring

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Editor's note: Staff writer Bill Barlow and his wife participated in the RREM program for their home in Ocean City.

Come May 1, Housing Recovery Centers established statewide to help in the recovery after Hurricane Sandy will be consolidated into two regional centers.

Neither is near South Jersey.

The state Department of Community Affairs has announced that the remaining recovery centers will be consolidated into two regional centers, one in Freehold in Monmouth County, another in Newark.

Some locals have expressed concern about the impact in Cape May and Atlantic counties, where many Sandy relief projects have not yet entered the construction phase. But DCA spokeswoman Lisa Ryan said recently that Atlantic and Cape May County homeowners in one of the recovery programs will still be able to speak to their housing advisors by phone.

The Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation program, or RREM, is a federally funded program through the state's ReNew Jersey Stronger initiative that is aimed at reducing damage from future storms. Under the program homeowners who could show significant damage from Sandy were eligible for up to \$150,000 for eligible projects.

So far, the RREM has put out close to \$1 billion, according to state data. Much of that money has gone to lifting shore homes above the latest flood plain elevation. The assistance is only available for the homeowner's primary residence, and recently, a woman pleaded guilty in federal court after being accused of fraud for seeking the funds for a property other than her primary residence.

In all, the state says 7,774 RREM grants have been signed, and 2,856 homes rebuilt. But things got off to a rocky start. Several housing advocates and homeowners involved with the process have complained about delays, wrongful denials, bureaucracy, confusing forms and a lack of transparency. In 2014, a group called the Fair Share Housing Center found that almost three-quarters of applicants who were initially denied assistance – more than 1,000 people – were approved on appeal. State



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A house being lifted in Ocean City. The state has signed more than 7,000 grants through the Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation program, spending close to \$1 billion statewide, including 1,175 properties in Atlantic County and 236 in RREM, according to state information,

officials cited faulty information from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The initial contractor hired to run the program, Hammerman and Gainer, the company responsible for many of those initial rejections, was dropped in early 2014. The company still received \$10.5 million for the work, according to numerous published stories from the time.

Few complaints, but fewer still are talking

According to Ryan, the office consolidation will take place because the program has reached a point where few participating homeowners have to meet with representatives and sign paperwork. There are fewer than 50 applicants statewide who have to sign their grant award agreement. Once that is signed, she said, the applicant enters the preconstruction and the construction phase, and is no longer traveling to the recovery centers.

Joe Mangino of Beach Haven West helped put together the New Jersey Organizing Project, which has been a consistent critic of the RREM program. He said the group's focus is Sandy recovery, or "making sure people can get home and afford to stay home."

"I don't think it's necessarily a bad idea to consolidate the offices, if that means they're keeping their best and their brightest available. It's just unfortunate it's so far north," Mangino said in a recent interview.

He said there have been many problems with the implementation of the RREM program. His biggest concern is people who have been in the program for years and have not yet begun the construction phase. Some are running out of rental assistance.

"That's been really tough," he said. "There are people who are out of the house and their project hasn't started yet. They're in a difficult position: 'We can pay our mortgage or we can pay our rent, because we can't pay both.'"

Since that interview, the Christie administration has announced an extension of rental assistance for up to a year for people in the RREM program and the Low to Moderate Income rebuilding program, which is aimed at those who did not apply for the RREM or have limited English proficiency. LMI began accepting applications in January of 2015. The RREM stopped accepting applications in August of 2013.

Participants in each are eligible for up to \$1,300 a month to rent somewhere to stay during the construction or elevation phase.

According to Ryan, the extension of rental help recognizes that for some, the work is taking longer than anticipated.

"Once construction starts, really it is a project between the homeowner and the builder," she said. "In any project there's going to be twists and turns."

DCA Commissioner Charles Richman said in a prepared statement that the Rental Assistance Program has made a "tremendous difference" in the lives of Sandy survivors who are rebuilding their homes and

couldn't otherwise afford to pay for temporary housing while they are in construction.

"These families have come so far; additional rental assistance will go a long way in helping them cross the finish line and complete their projects," he said.

Several local residents have expressed worry that the help will run out before work even gets started, and frustration with the delays. But most people contacted declined to comment on the record.

Some said they may be willing to talk after their projects have been completed and the final paperwork is signed.

Matt Maas of Ocean City was willing to speak, and for the most part had good things to say about the program. It took about two years to get the final authorization for the grant, and he signed the agreement letter with RREM last April. He and his wife, Sara, own a house in the south end that was lifted March 15.

"Two days after Sandy, I went and registered with the disaster assistance with FEMA. That was the biggest thing that made everything else happen," he said in an interview on Monday, March 21.

Maas is the reference librarian at the Ocean City Free Public Library and the school librarian at the Upper Township Middle School. He said being a librarian helped him keep track of the numerous programs offered through the state and the sometimes confusing series of steps and qualifications. They also needed a letter from the city's floodplain manager.

Maas said they were lucky during Sandy, and that after the project is completed, they will feel far safer facing future storms with the house standing 5 feet higher.

"It'll be nice to not have to worry about water getting into our home," he said.

Maas understood why some homeowners are frustrated.

"I think sometimes people get frustrated with the pace of things. You have to realize you're dealing with a lot of different agencies, a lot of different programs, and a lot of different people. You know, it's just the bureaucracy," he said. "It took a while, but everybody was helpful" and every issue got worked out eventually.

According to Ryan, 1,175 homeowners in Atlantic County are participating in the RREM program, and 51 are in the LMI rebuilding program. In Cape May County, there are 236 in the RREM and eight in LMI.

"Overall, of the approximately 7,800 Sandy-impacted homeowners participating in RREM, nearly 2,900 have finished construction and received a certificate of occupancy. Of the approximately 325 Sandy-impacted homeowners participating in the LMI program, which closed its application period less than a year ago, nearly 10 have finished construction and received a certificate of occupancy," Ryan said in an email March 17.

Services will still be provided to those participants after the Housing Recovery Center consolidation –

only it will have to be by telephone, in person at the regional centers in Freehold and Newark, or as needed at an alternate location, she said.

“For those who are unable to travel to the regional centers in Freehold or Newark, DCA has identified meeting locations in Atlantic City and Toms River where homeowners can meet with their housing advisors closer to their homes on an as-needed basis and, where necessary, the housing advisors will come to a homeowner’s house,” Ryan said.

She said DCA will continue to hold Housing Recovery Information Sessions in hard-hit communities, including Atlantic and Ocean counties.

“DCA’s Sandy Constituent Services Office is another resource homeowners can utilize if they have questions about their recovery effort. While their primary contacts for questions about their rebuilding project remain their project manager and housing advisor, if they need further assistance, DCA’s Sandy Constituent Services Office has experienced representatives who can address their questions,” she wrote.