

Road Home deadlines are rescinded - Thousands of applicants have encountered technical obstacles

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Author: David Hammer Staff writer

Thanks to a living room chat with a cancer-stricken 9th Ward resident and other recent face-to-face meetings with Road Home applicants or their advocates, the state's recovery chief has agreed to rescind looming deadlines.

Louisiana Recovery Authority Director Paul Rainwater said individual encounters with beleaguered residents made him realize that Sept. 5 and Oct. 1 deadlines he imposed early in August -- ostensibly to compel Road Home applicants to provide missing documentation and resolve legal issues -- would end up hurting too many people who have no control over the program's delays.

"I realized the legal pipe is not big enough to handle all of the people who would have been cut out by the deadlines," Rainwater said.

That means there's no longer an ultimatum hanging over the following groups of applicants: about 2,800 with legal, title, financial and power-of-attorney issues; 2,700 who haven't been able to prove to the Road Home program that they owned their homes at the time of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita; 1,200 who haven't proved occupancy at the time of the storms; 900 whose files are missing other documents, such as Social Security cards; and 5,400 who sold their homes before the Road Home was launched and were recently made eligible for a grant.

Only one deadline will remain in place: a directive for about 3,000 applicants to select what kind of grant they want -- to rebuild their home or for a state buyout of their property -- by sending in what's called the Benefit Option Selection Form. And that deadline, originally set for Sept. 5, will be pushed back to Nov. 1, officials said.

More than 117,000 families have collected Road Home grants since the program began two years ago. About 15,000 other applicants have made it most of the way through the process, but are still waiting for grant closings and are hung up for various reasons.

Legal advocate Davida Finger took Rainwater last weekend to meet one of them, an 80-year-old woman identified only as Ms. Annie. Sitting in Ms. Annie's living room, Rainwater heard how the Road Home used a hand-scrawled Post-It note to inform the cancer patient that she needed a lawyer and something called an heirship affidavit, a new directive that only confused her more.

"I was told I need a succession, then I was told I didn't, then they sent me a letter in the mail with a note, and it says, 'Get a lawyer.' Well, I can't afford a lawyer," Finger recalled Ms. Annie saying.

Legal advocates say there are thousands more like her who can't afford a private lawyer. But Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, a legal-aid consortium hired by the Road Home to help applicants through the process, has only enough financing to take care of about 550 cases by the end of the year, said co-director Mark Moreau.

Moreau and others told Rainwater in a meeting Tuesday that the deadlines actually made it harder to get lawyers to handle unserved applicants because they didn't leave enough time to handle the task -- "even if the lawyer has a heart of gold," Moreau said.

As soon as the state announced the deadlines earlier this month, groups such as the New Orleans Legal Assistance Center, Loyola Law Clinic, All Congregations Together and Citizens Road Home Action Team complained that the deadlines were only exacerbating applicants' stress, just as the third anniversary of Katrina was conjuring painful memories.

Still, Rainwater wouldn't say the deadlines were for naught.

He said they helped motivate 3,000 Road Home applicants to show up at a series of outreach sessions, where LRA, Office of Community Development and Road Home agents from contractor ICF International were all available to work through issues. In all, 800 participants were able to advance in the application process, Rainwater said.

"What I learned from (Ms. Annie) is we need a more individualized system," he said. "So, we're going to start doing outreach with smaller groups of folks, and we're going to have attorneys there pushing people through."

Finger said she was glad she was able to help Rainwater come around on the deadlines. But she said rescinding them hasn't resolved issues that applicants were facing with systemic legal problems and erroneous grant calculations.

"In reviewing files, we see mistake after mistake," she said.

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David Hammer can be reached at dhammer@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3322.

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