

Louisiana's Road Home refuses to budge on deadlines

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The Louisiana Recovery Authority has no plans to rescind recently instated Road Home Program deadlines that legal assistance groups say could jeopardize thousands of grants for homeowners who have been trying to collect the funds needed to rebuild for as long as two years. "Right now we are sticking with the deadlines," said Christina Stephens, spokeswoman for the LRA. Announced on July 30, the cutoff gives the 8,400 applicants who haven't yet completed all program paperwork until Sept. 5 to turn in all outstanding documentation or lose eligibility for the federally funded grant. Another 2,822 applicants facing problems with title, succession, power-of-attorney and mortgage issues have until Oct. 1 to resolve all legal issues or forgo rebuilding money. Another 505 applicants who haven't closed for other reasons also face the Oct. 1 deadline, said Stephens. While the LRA maintains that deadlines are necessary to push applicants forward in time for the program's final closing deadline in June of 2010 and that extensions will be given on a case-by-case basis, lawyers from Southeast Louisiana Legal Services and Loyola University Law School Clinic say the policy will lock thousands out from collecting the cash they need to return home and create an unnecessary layer of paperwork for those who file for extensions. "Sending people chasing to document that they should get an extension and having ICF and LRA staff reviewing as to entitlement to extensions is an unnecessary and counterproductive waste of time," legal advocates David Williams, Davida Finger and Bill Quigley wrote in a letter sent to Gov. Bobby Jindal on Thursday. The letter came two days after a request from the same legal advocates for a recession of the deadlines to Jindal and LRA Executive Director Paul Rainwater. In that letter, sent Tuesday, the advocates took the LRA to task for implementing an unexpected deadline when there is a shortage of qualified pro-bono attorneys to assist low-income homeowners who are struggling to complete applications. Also criticized was Road Home administrator ICF International. "Leaving applicants with just 30 days to complete submissions is inadequate given how poorly ICF has administered the Road Home Program," Williams, Finger and Quigley wrote. In addition, cultural patterns of oral or informal title transfer have made proving property succession difficult for thousands of homeowners who inherited homes in New Orleans' black neighborhoods, making the new policy especially hard on that particular population. "In our experience about 90 percent of the homeowners with difficult succession matters are African-American. As a result, it is clear that the impact of this change would disproportionately disqualify African-Americans from participating in this program," the legal advocates said in the Tuesday letter. In an interview, LRA Executive Director Paul Rainwater said that his goal was to help people - and the program - move forward. "We are reaching out to people who are having trouble closing," he said. "I am not going to shut down the program, but we do have to set some deadline." As means of providing direct assistance to applicants, the state has initiated a series of outreach meetings. The first, held Wednesday in Houma, attracted 300 applicants, said Stephens. On Saturday, the LRA will host the first of five walk-in meetings in the New Orleans area. The outreach session is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. and run until 3 p.m. at the University of New Orleans' Lindy Boggs Conference Center.

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