

News
From _____

CONGRESSMAN

Nick Rahall

WEST VIRGINIA-4th DISTRICT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Oct. 27, 1977

CONTACT: Michael Serpe
202-225-3452

Washington D.C. --- "We must finally be making some progress, if HUD is admitting some mistakes," Fourth District Congressman Nick J. Rahall, (D-WV), said today. The Beckley Democrat made the remarks in regards to a letter he has just received from Housing and Urban Development Secretary Patricia Harris.

In answer to Rahall's charge that public officials and local citizens were not involved formally in flood relief operations, Sec. Harris replied,

"With respect to involving public officials and leading members of the community in recovery plans and operations, I became convinced, in part as the result of our experiences in West Virginia, that the Department (HUD) should be more aggressive in establishing relations with State officials, and with local officials and community leaders to identify concerns and problems areas before they grow to major proportions."

Sec. Harris also stated that new approaches were used in Pennsylvania, which she said, "produced visible results." (COPY OF HARRIS' LETTER IS ATTACHED)

Congressman Rahall stated that, "I have heard from more and more people, that HUD's effort during the Johnstown flood went very well. I fear that West Virginia was a proving ground for the Department's flood recovery operations."

Sec. Harris' answers to Congressman Rahall's charges, were in the form of a letter to Rep. Thomas L. Ashley, (D-OH), who is chairman of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development. Ashley has shown a great deal of interest in the problems West Virginia flood victims due to Rahall's attempt to bring about a Congressional investigation.

Rahall, commenting on Harris' letter stated, "It also seems that Mrs. Harris realizes the need for continued training and preparedness for staff members assigned to flood recovery efforts."

Congressman Rahall went on to say, "It is stated that HUD's efforts were hampered by West Virginia's "rugged terrain." There's no doubt that our State has a rugged terrain and that it has a history of flooding. I would expect the Federal agencies in charge of assisting disaster victims would know how to handle the situation regardless of the terrain."

In conclusion, Rahall observed that he expects much more to come out of the congressional investigation that is presently underway into the Federal Disaster relief effort which took place in southern West Virginia.



THE SECRETARY OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20410

✓
Honorable Thomas L. Ashley
Chairman, Subcommittee on Housing
and Community Development
Committee on Banking, Finance and
Urban Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Ashley:

I am responding to your letter of August 25 requesting my comments on a letter which you received from Representative Rahall, concerning this Department's performance in responding to the April flooding disaster in West Virginia. It is difficult to respond specifically to the general allegations in Mr. Rahall's letter, but I will touch on each of them.

Mr. Rahall considers the response too slow, and says that the scope of the damage was underestimated. The disaster occurred on April 3, the Governor requested the President to declare a major disaster on April 6, and the President made the declaration on the following day. Disaster assistance centers, at which victims were registered for available relief programs, were opened on April 9. By April 10, over 700 Federal personnel from 15 agencies were operating in the West Virginia disaster area. The time lapse between the event and the request for assistance suggests that the nature of the area and the state of communications made it at least as difficult for the State to make a preliminary assessment of the situation as we later found it to be in completing our detailed surveys for damage. At the time of the 11 county West Virginia disaster, the Department was simultaneously responding to floods in 31 counties of the neighboring States of Kentucky and Virginia. Aside from the sheer magnitude of the problem, efforts were hampered by the rugged terrain and the almost total lack of indigenous resources in the area which could be tapped to provide immediate emergency shelter to those driven from their homes.

Housing was provided for 2,160 disaster victims in West Virginia. All victims were housed within 129 days of the President's declaration. In 986 cases this housing

was in the form of mobile homes, which had to be brought in from outside the area, placed on sites which, generally, were prepared by the Federal Government, and hooked to utilities systems developed by the Federal Government. While, as I stated after my visit to the West Virginia disaster area, it is difficult to counsel patience to those who have lost all they have, it is just not possible to deal with the problems of all disaster victims at the same time.

Mr. Rahall also says that "the location of a headquarters outside the flooded area had a very detrimental effect on the victims." I presume that he is referring to the office established by the Federal Coordinating Officer in Bluefield on April 8, the day after the President's major disaster declaration. One of the primary functions of a disaster field office is to provide a base of operations for the Federal Coordinating Officer, who is responsible for coordinating the administration of all relief in the disaster area, including the activities of the Federal agencies, the State government, and those volunteer agencies which agree to operate under his advice or direction. To fulfill this function, he must have facilities which provide adequate communications and space and which are located as near as possible to the disaster area. Choosing a location for the disaster field office is often made on the basis of a minimum amount of information on the nature of the disaster situation and the availability of alternate sites. Considering all of these factors, we believe we made a reasonable choice.

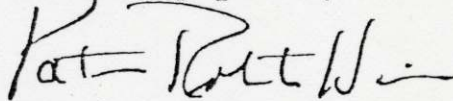
Individual victims are counseled on and registered for disaster assistance programs at the disaster assistance centers, not at the disaster field offices. Eight disaster assistance centers opened in the disaster area for a combined total of 97 days. In addition, mobile teams were dispatched to 11 communities which were not accessible to the established centers. A total of 21,876 people were registered through these efforts.

As to the number and quality of staff, five percent of the total full-time staff of this Department was committed to recovery efforts in the Appalachian disaster area. The disaster team consists of permanent professional disaster personnel and permanent personnel from other operating areas augmented by temporary personnel. We believe that the disaster team in Appalachia worked very hard to achieve rapid recovery from the disaster, but we recognize the need for continued training and preparedness in this area.

With respect to involving public officials and leading members of the community in recovery plans and operations, I became convinced, in part as the result of our experiences in West Virginia, that the Department should be more aggressive in establishing relations with State officials and with local officials and community leaders to identify concerns and problem areas before they grow to major proportions. This approach was adopted in the recent declaration for the State of Pennsylvania and, I believe, has produced visible results. I intend that it become a continued feature of the Department's response to future disasters.

As I previously said, general allegations are specifically difficult to respond to, but I have tried to identify what we believe to be the major considerations affecting the problem areas identified by Mr. Rahall. I will be pleased to provide any further information you may require.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Pat Roberts Harris", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patricia Roberts Harris