

November 17, 2017

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

We are writing as a coalition of religious and community leaders to express our support for S. 1823/H.R. 2405, the “Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act of 2017.” This legislation was introduced in the United States Senate by Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO) and in the House of Representatives by Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ) earlier this year and will ensure fair and equal treatment for houses of worship damaged in natural disasters.

In the aftermath of natural disasters—including Hurricane Sandy, the 2016 Houston flood, and the recent devastation in Houston, Florida, and Puerto Rico—churches, synagogues and other houses of worship offered essential response services to people in need. In many cases—especially following Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Harvey—these houses of worship provided essential services while the church or synagogue itself was damaged. Unfortunately, in the case of Hurricane Sandy, FEMA officials refused to give emergency grants to houses of worship (even though these houses of worship otherwise qualified as nonprofit entities). Many houses of worship damaged this year in the hurricanes in Houston and Florida have applied for relief under FEMA, but have received no indication that FEMA will consider their applications.

The Stafford Act provides that private nonprofit entities – such as schools, hospitals, museums and community centers – damaged in a natural disaster may receive financial grants from FEMA to repair their buildings. The Act does not exclude houses of worship in any way.

It is, therefore, entirely appropriate for FEMA’s aid program for private nonprofits to assist houses of worship with their rebuilding needs. Moreover, if houses of worship are excluded from this otherwise religion neutral program – that unfair treatment would be improper anti-religious discrimination.

Current Supreme Court jurisprudence makes clear that religious institutions may receive government financial aid in the context of a broad program administered on the basis of religion neutral criteria. This is why houses of worship and other religious nonprofits can, for example, currently receive grants from DHS to improve their security and the Interior Department for historic preservation.

The “Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act of 2017” clarifies the Stafford Act and is consistent with these precedents and policies. We urge you to encourage the Senate and House to pass this measure, we respectfully ask you to sign it, and we request that you encourage FEMA to honor the applications for relief of all nonprofit organizations, including houses of worship.

Thank you, Mr. President, for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

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Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

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