



## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# REBUILD FLORIDA PROGRAM MIRED IN FRAUD ALLEGATIONS

Summer is on its way out, but hurricane season is about to peak — and Rebuild Florida (a grant-funded partnership between HUD and Florida Commerce) is in deep water.

This program is mired in fraud allegations, and as a taxpayer, we all have skin in the game.

Did you know that \$480 million was earmarked to rescue citizens living in storm-ravaged homes? Seven years after Hurricane Irma, approved cases are still pending. Others are marked as complete when they are anything but. The “lucky ones” who received “help” now feel more vulnerable during storms, thanks to shoddy workmanship and inferior materials. And don’t even dream about hurricane-resistant glass — storm-hardening falls into the luxury category.

Residents from Key West to Jacksonville, from coast to coast in the Sunshine State, have endured abusive practices even as subsequent storms exacerbated their misery. Where is the outrage? The oversight? Key lime may be the flavor of choice, but this low-lying island chain has missed out on its slice of the pie.

Fifty million dollars were designated specifically for the Florida Keys. And now, it’s time for some answers. This program was founded on good intentions. Uninsured homeowners who met the stringent criteria would have their homes repaired or rebuilt with the grant funding. It sounds simple, but the process is grueling and soul crushing. So are the endless delays. I am a recipient who was hoodwinked by the lies and have been sidelined since 2019.

The owner of my land lease mobile home park refused to participate, citing the program’s infamous reputation. (Rebuild Florida allegedly hires unskilled labor, damages properties and lacks clear timelines.) As an alternative, they offered to buy me a new mobile home in the community. I toured models and found the perfect floor

plan at the right price. Just before closing, HUD blocked the deal because it violated program rules. You see, Rebuild Florida learns to pilot the plane at maximum capacity. Exhausted, I depleted my 401(k) and settled for a distant rural lot, incurring H.O.A. fees and taxes. Now it sits vacant.

You know fraud is afoot when online support groups emerge, and victims share a common thread — gaslighting, lost documentation and forgotten promises. Management suggests applicants “withdraw if the process becomes too burdensome.”

The physical, financial and emotional fallout of this program is far from over. If I am drafted to serve in this war on corruption, I will proudly be its poster child. Why are we ignoring the decomposing elephant in the room? The stench rides on hurricane force winds and then drifts down from the mainland to the Florida Keys.

How does Alex Kelly, secretary of Florida Commerce, justify the outrageous cost of stuffing families into hotels for up to five years while construction creeps to a halt? He does it by blame-shifting. In 2021, they contracted IEM to administer the Rebuild Florida Irma program. I have one question: Where did our tax dollars really go? Some call it “charity gone wrong.” I call it a CRIME. Our elected officials must steady this ship because it is sinking fast.

Rebuild Florida invokes the “inactive” status to inflate fulfillment reports on project completion — it takes the heat off, temporarily. This protracted abuse is far worse than anything Hurricane Irma inflicted. Meanwhile, FEMA (which announced it has run out of money mid-hurricane season) has embraced the business of sponsoring art exhibitions.

Hey, Florida, examine priorities much?

*Sincerely,  
Wendy Miller-Aguiar  
South Florida resident*