

Agudath Israel Welcomes FEMA expansion of Disaster Aid to Houses of Worship

From Rabbi Abba Cohen, Agudath Israel's V.P. for Federal Affairs and Washington Director

Agudath Israel of America, a national Orthodox Jewish organization, commends the Trump Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for expanding federal assistance eligibility to houses of worship damaged in natural disasters.

The policy change reflects the request the White House recently made to congressional leaders to pass legislation that would allow houses of worship to receive such disaster relief aid. The House has passed such legislation; the Senate is expected to do so in the coming weeks. FEMA's official announcement of the new policy indicated that the change will be reflected in the agency's Public Assistance Program Policy Guide.

Agudath Israel has been among the organizations in the forefront of promoting, through both policy change and legislation, the equitable treatment of religious entities in federal programs. In regard to FEMA in particular, we have been engaged for over two decades in helping houses of worship (and religious schools) obtain a full measure of FEMA aid for the repair and restoration of their disaster-damaged facilities. Unfortunately, unnecessary and unfair limitations placed specifically on houses of worship by FEMA have presented formidable challenges, precluding such relief. Without the much needed aid, they often face staggering costs that make rebuilding prohibitive.

There is no constitutional reason to treat houses of worship

in this discriminatory manner. Indeed, denying the benefits of a widely available public program that is religion-neutral evinces a form of hostility toward religion that is prohibited by our nation's laws and values. Agudath Israel applauds FEMA's new policy that houses of worship should be treated like other vital nonprofits and receive federal assistance without prejudice or discrimination.

We will continue to work with the Trump Administration and congressional leaders to solidify and enshrine the new FEMA policy in legislation so that it becomes a permanent and consistently-applied provision in the federal disaster relief program