

May 16, 2018

The Honorable Senator Joe Manchin  
United States Senate  
Via e-mail

Dear Senator Manchin:

By way of introduction, we first became acquainted in the late '90s when I served as mayor of Wheeling. Awhile after I left office, my bishop reassigned me to Huntington where I served as senior pastor of Johnson Memorial United Methodist Church where our beloved friends Steve and Jane Kopp were members. You were gracious to carve time to attend Marshall University President Kopp's funeral service which I conducted at the church, limited in attendance to family, friends, and invited guests. You and I spoke briefly before and after the service. In 2016, I attempted retirement; however, following the devastating storms and flood disaster of June 23, 2016, Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball asked me to direct the United Methodist recovery efforts throughout the 12-county declared disaster zone. It has been an honor to serve The WV Conference of The United Methodist Church and to be a partner of our global United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), and it has been a highlight of my 49 years of ministry with The UMC to see first hand the determination and resiliency of the people of West Virginia when struck by an overwhelming disastrous event. Most recently, I was asked to offer a prayer at your gathering on primary election night but regret that travel in the disaster recovery zone prohibited my being back in Charleston in time.

I write to seek your help in moving WV RISE from its stagnant dormancy to the promises made to The United Methodist Church,

partner ecumenical and secular bodies, funding partners, volunteer work team partners, and especially to survivors of the disaster. From increasing and more frustrating conversations with our disaster recovery partners, particularly those of us active with funding, volunteer work teams, and disaster case management, I know that The United Methodist Church is not alone as we have sat on the sidelines, having trusted what we were told by WV RISE, WVDO officials, and the consulting firm of Horn, LLC while disaster survivors have likewise been told to wait – and wait.

You were delighted to announce, and we were thrilled to hear, that The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development through the Community Development Block Grant program would provide \$104,000,000 for disaster recovery. As news unfolded, the amount increased to \$107,492,000. I believe there were further increases of funding announced.

At a meeting held June 15, 2017 at the Sports Performance Center at The Greenbrier, people from the WVDO and the consulting firm described the WV RISE program and provided iPads to disaster case managers, including our UM case managers. The iPads were programmed to provide easy intake for client referrals to RISE. At the meeting, we were provided details of the grant and how it would be used. Those of us present that day were told that 1,000 homes would be built in the 12-county declared disaster zone (80% in the counties of Greenbrier, Clay, Nicholas, and Kanawha) in less than a year. We were also told that RISE expected to serve 600 to 800 households. That math doesn't work very well, but I report to you here what we were told to indicate the magnitude and efficiency of work that was promised: 1,000 houses to be built, preferably by local construction contractors, in less than a year. Numerous other details were provided including Social Vulnerability Index priorities, single family home construction or rehab, mobile home

replacement, elevation remediation, temporary rental assistance, and flood insurance.

We were told the first homes would be under construction in August of 2017. Then September. Then October.

On February 5 of this year, after numerous concerns were raised about RISE's delays and requirements that make no sense given WV's sociology and geography, a meeting was held at the Clay County Courthouse to discuss this. I attended along with ecumenical and other partners because we were being embarrassed by RISE, being caught in the web of RISE's delays. We further wanted to let the citizens who attended know what we were doing to assist recovery apart from and in spite of RISE. Representatives from your office as well as the offices of Senator Capito, Congressman Mooney, and FEMA were present. A staff member of the WVDO assured everyone present that during that month, February 2018, 50 home would be under construction. When pressed about that number, he said that 30 some for sure would be under construction.

To date, not one house has been constructed. Not one house has had construction to begin. Two mobile homes have been placed but are neither set up nor yet habitable.

In Roane County, I can point to three RISE applicants who are held up for unexplainable reasons, all three elderly women, two in their 70s and one 85. At their ages and living conditions, will HUD or WV RISE need to explain why one of them died before she could get into a home after a disaster nearly two years ago? Ecumenical and voluntary organizations have been told by WV RISE not to spend donated dollars on projects that RISE could take. This is a fast growing immorality as we see it, keeping people from recovery while HUD and RISE fool around with this.

One of my UM case managers has a case with a large family whose home was destroyed in Kanawha County. The Elk River undercut the land where their home sat. Their lot stretches up the hill from the precise site of the former home. RISE has told them they will not build on their own lot unless it is on the exact previous site where the land does not exist as it was. Does this make any sense to you? Would you be able to defend HUD and WV RISE and their disqualification of our client family? No thanks to RISE, we have received generous gifts from three Charleston United Methodist Churches to fund their new house, and we have secured the commitment of Mennonite Disaster Services to provide the labor to build it.

Our other case manager has a case in Nicholas County whose home was destroyed by the flood. As with the case above, a new home could be built on his land further up the hill from the house that was destroyed but which now has mine drainage that floods the site. RISE has disqualified him because he does not want to live in a home that RISE would build on the mine drainage impacted former home site. Can you make sense of this or defend HUD or WV RISE and their disqualification of this client? As I write this, we are seeking funding partners to care for this survivor and get him into a home.

Our United Methodist case managers have other clients who have been disqualified by RISE or are caught in the unconscionable and strangling delays. To reiterate, we are not alone with this problem that is affecting ecumenical and secular partners, especially our survivor families. The WV United Methodist Church, our ecumenical partners, and other voluntary organizations are stepping up to move forward to help survivors move from untenable, dangerous situations into residences that are safe, secure, and sanitary.

What can you do to move this important program along?

How much money has been paid to the consulting firm?

How much money has been provided to the West Virginia Development Office?

Please, please help. No doubt this is likewise an embarrassment to you. I will be pleased to meet with you – or take you on a tour of recovery sites – or answer questions that you may have.

Sincerely, with best personal regards,

John W. (Jack) Lipphardt, Director  
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