

# **Louisiana Department of Education to Pay \$1.26 Million to Resolve Civil Liability in Connection with Hurricane Disaster Assistance Payments**

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**For Immediate Release**

Office of Public Affairs

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) has agreed to pay the United States \$1,262,614.01 to resolve allegations that it received excess payments from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for the replacement of an educational facility in Louisiana that was damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

The settlement resolves allegations that, from August 2005 to December 2016, LDE received certain payments from FEMA for the replacement of a school facility damaged by Hurricane Katrina based on erroneous information. Under FEMA's Public Assistance Program, eligible applicants are entitled either to receive repair costs or, if repair costs exceed 50% of replacement costs, receive replacement costs for a facility damaged by a disaster. According to the allegations in the government's complaint, LDE received FEMA Public Assistance Program funds to replace the Florence J. Chester Elementary School Cafeteria Building (Chester Cafeteria Building) based on erroneous information prepared, reviewed and submitted to FEMA by a government contractor. Relying on the erroneous application for funds, FEMA obligated funding to replace the Chester Cafeteria Building even though LDE was entitled only to repair funds under the applicable FEMA rules.

"FEMA provides critical financial support to help communities recover from disasters," said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Brian M. Boynton, head of the Justice Department's Civil Division. "Today's settlement demonstrates the department's commitment to protecting the integrity of such funds and ensuring that they are disbursed in accordance with program requirements."

"DHS-OIG along with our law enforcement partners will continue to investigate and help recover overpayments from FEMA's disaster relief fund," said Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). "Today's agreement reflects our collective commitment to protecting taxpayer dollars."

The United States has now recovered more than \$26 million in connection with the disaster assistance applications for educational facilities submitted to FEMA following Hurricane Katrina. The United States previously settled with AECOM Inc., Xavier University of Louisiana and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans with respect to their alleged role in the submission of false certifications for FEMA funding prepared by AECOM. The settlement with LDE resolves allegations made by the government in a lawsuit that was originally filed against AECOM and other parties, captioned *United States ex rel. Robert Romero v. AECOM Inc., et al.*, No. 16-cv-15092 (EDLA.), to which the United States added LDE as a defendant in 2020.

The resolution obtained in this matter was the result of a coordinated effort between the Justice Department's Civil Division, Commercial Litigation Branch, Fraud Section and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Louisiana, with assistance from FEMA's Office of Chief Counsel. Investigative support was provided by DHS-OIG, through its Major Fraud and Corruption Unit and New Orleans Resident Office.

Trial Attorneys Laura Hill, Richard Hagner, Gavin Thole and Robin Overby of the Civil Division's Commercial Litigation Branch, Fraud Section, along with Assistant U.S. Attorney Mimi Nguyen for the Eastern District of Louisiana and Charles Schexnaildre of FEMA's Office of Chief Counsel handled the matter.

*The claims resolved by the settlement are allegations only. There has been no determination of liability.*

## [Settlement](#)

*Updated April 1, 2024*