

Agriculture by Patricia Salisbury

FEMA launches food, housing control

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The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), charged with handling dire physical emergencies and disasters, has since 1983 been increasingly involved in controlling food and housing for the poor and homeless.

FEMA's involvement is part of a pattern by which state and local agencies, churches, and community groups, long the main sources of aid and counseling to the poor and unemployed in U.S. communities, are being replaced by agencies less responsive to constituencies. This pattern is dangerous in the present period, when food supplies are collapsing, and decisions as to how scarce supplies of food will be distributed will be life-and-death questions.

Directors of independent food banks around the country have been sounding the alarm that, even now, food is rationed on a political basis, and that individuals and groups that challenge local or national establishments are being cut off. These complaints have been made by independent food banks in Ohio, Texas, Maryland, and California.

The FEMA program in question, termed the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board (EFSNB), was created in 1983 when an economic recession was acknowledged to require funding of food supplies and shelter throughout the country. In its current form, the board consists of FEMA and six powerful national voluntary organizations: the United Way, the Red Cross, the National Council of Churches, the Salvation Army, the National Jewish Federation, and

Catholic Charities.

Federal funding for this apparatus is being increased at the same time that cutbacks in other programs such as the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) are forcing food banks to shut down. Almost 1 billion fewer pounds of surplus food will be distributed by the government this year than last. The FEMA apparatus, on the other hand, which started with an initial grant of \$50 million for fiscal 1983, is now funded at \$125 million annually.

FEMA got its start in the food and housing business as part of an experiment dreamed up in the office of Rep. Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.). In 1983, according to a staff member of the EFSNB, Congress started a unique program to funnel emergency money to the poor. A total of \$100 million was allocated for relief, with \$50 million going to state governments, and \$50 million going to FEMA and an association of the voluntary organizations named above.

At the end of one year, when Congress asked for an accounting, they determined that the states had done an inefficient job of handling the money, and the principle was established that this aid should be funneled through FEMA in the future. For these purposes, at least, Congress would rely as little as possible on what they termed "the usual machinery of government." In later years, the entire sum of money available was appropriated to FEMA's board. FEMA proceeded to create associated boards on the local level, with local representatives of the national voluntary agencies making up

the boards.

While local governments are included at the local level, National Board spokesmen emphasize that the apparatus is entirely non-governmental. Food banks and other community organizations in a local area apply to the local boards for funding. The local boards have complete discretion as to how the money is spent. In some areas, it is all devoted to sheltering the homeless. In others, it subsidizes the operation of food banks, and some local boards choose a mix of disbursements.

This use of the agency's EFSNB as a dispenser of federal aid for food and shelter was institutionalized in the Stewart McKinney Memorial Act of 1987, which also mandated that "underutilized" federal properties should be turned over to the homeless. This act in turn was the brainchild of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which is emerging as a key institution in a network of establishment-controlled "charity organizations."

The Alliance, as it terms itself, boasts on its advisory board a number of individuals closely associated with the worst elements in the new Bush administration. The most prominent is Mrs. James Baker III, the wife of the presumed next Secretary of State, who wants International Monetary Fund rules imposed on the United States.

The Alliance is now moving to set itself up as a coordinating body for all of the hunger advocacy groups around the country, and is on terms of close informal collaboration with the FEMA apparatus. The Alliance is also lending tacit support to the hunger strikes that are being run in Washington by the confrontationist Centers for Creative Non-Violence. Strange bedfellows for the federal agency charged with handling national emergencies.