

Prepared Remarks of Paul Stewart  
Government Reform and Oversight Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. Waxman and members of the committee, it is a great honor to be here today to discuss the experiences my wife and I endured with FEMA and the temporary camper they provided us in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, but at the same time I find it sad that this hearing has to take place at all.

First, to try and help all of you better understand our lives today I would like everyone to think for a minute about leaving their home this morning. You made sure the stove was off, the bed was made, the trash was out, and front door was locked. Now imagine that when you go home tonight your house is gone! Not burglarized or damaged by fire, just gone. And try to imagine that your neighbor's house is gone, your mom's house, gone, your local supermarket, Town Hall, all gone.

Now, roll the clock ahead two years and imagine that you are still living in a camper on what was once your driveway and ask yourself if your marriage would survive or what impact the situation would have on your children. Imagine that for the next two years of your life privacy will be unattainable and imagine spending your next two Christmases in a 240 square foot space, with your family and relatives. And now imagine that in this same time span your family's health has been in danger because the temporary camper that FEMA provided as a safe haven is contaminated with formaldehyde.

That is life today for tens of thousands of Gulf Coast residents and that is why I am here today, to tell my story and extend a plea for help and understanding.

On December 2, 2005 our FEMA camper was delivered. We had a friend, who had already returned to the area, meet FEMA and take possession of the camper and he immediately noticed that it had a very strong "new" smell. He told us that the fumes in the camper made his eyes burn so we instructed him to open all the windows and turn the heat on as my wife and I had already heard FEMA officials say that the campers needed to "air out" and had issued instructions on how to do complete the process. Two days later we arrived home and I turned off the heat, but left the windows and exhaust vent open, the camper stayed that way for the next 4 months.

The first night we stayed in the camper my wife woke several times with difficulty breathing and a runny nose. She got up once and turned on the lights to discover that her runny nose was in fact, a bloody nose. This scared the hell out of us; we didn't know what was causing her bloody nose, or breathing issues and I was beginning to show symptoms of my own, which included, burring eyes, scratchy throat, coughing, and runny nose.

The symptoms continued for weeks and then months and finally we thought about just leaving, but at that point we were stuck because we were still wrestling with insurance issues, the Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA, our lot was still strewn with debris, money was in short supply, and I was trying to hold onto my job. We just couldn't afford to move.

Then one morning I woke up to find our pet cockatiel lethargic, unresponsive, and unable to keep his balance. Our bird is not very old and we usually woke to his singing so I immediately called the veterinarian who told me to get the bird out of the camper and bring him over to his office as soon as I could. I put the bird outside on the driveway, my wife and I got ready to leave, and within an hour of being out of the camper the bird began to look better, not good, but better.

We got to the veterinarian and he examined the bird telling us that we needed to get him out of the camper or it would kill him. He told us that the chemicals in the camper were too strong for the bird and his respiratory system could not take the toxins. The veterinarian told us that birds, much like children, breathe much more rapidly than adults and therefore take in not only more air, but more of the contaminants in the air. I asked the veterinarian what kind of contaminants could be inside a new camper. He told us that there are a lot of different chemicals that off gas from a newly constructed camper, but the birds' problem was probably being caused by formaldehyde. This was the first time it really hit us that our FEMA camper could actually be dangerous and thought if it could kill the bird, what was it doing to us?

From that point on we kept the bird outside whenever possible and saw him steadily improve and looking back, my wife and I believe our pet cockatiel CiCi, was our real life "canary in the coal mine" and credit CiCi with saving our lives.

I then started researching what formaldehyde and the other contaminants inside my camper might be doing to our health and was shocked to discover that formaldehyde is listed as a carcinogen by the EPA. I also discovered something else; I believe that the formaldehyde gas was so high that it was actually setting off the smoke detectors inside the campers. This was a common problem with the FEMA campers and most people just pulled the detectors off the wall or tore the batteries out. I tested my hypothesis and put one smoke detector outside and kept one inside. The smoke detector that I put outside never activated while the one inside continued to trip. I then called a friend of mine who works as a firefighter and he called a company representative that he knew in the smoke detector industry and he confirmed that if formaldehyde gas was in a high enough concentration that it would indeed set the smoke detector off.

I called FEMA and told them about the problems we were having and the first thing FEMA told us to do was "air out" the camper. I explained that I had already been "airing" out the camper for almost 2 months and it had done nothing to reduce the smell or our symptoms. FEMA's response was hollow and degrading, they told us that there was nothing else they could do and that some people are just more "chemically sensitive" than others. Now this kind of statement made me angry. As a former US Army Airborne Infantry Officer, and former Police Officer, I have been Tased, Pepper Sprayed, and through more CS chambers than I care to remember, I AM NOT a chemically sensitive person.

Our symptoms continued and I continued to tell the FEMA inspectors, who came out almost weekly, that the formaldehyde in our camper was making us sick. The FEMA inspectors, who were contractors, noted the problem, but no one from FEMA ever responded.

I started looking for ways to mitigate the problem and the first thing I did was remove every piece of pressed wood I could reach and replace it with pine plank. I hoped this would help reduce the formaldehyde and alleviate our symptoms, it did neither. I then came across a Stennis Space Center study that claimed certain ferns can pull formaldehyde from the air, so I went out and purchase some ferns, but they also had not effect. I then purchased a material that is used in the mortuary business, a powdery substance that is designed to absorb the formaldehyde, but that didn't work either. Finally, I purchased an industrial size air purifier from a company that specializes in formaldehyde removal, Aller Air. The air purifier we purchased has a 15 pound charcoal filter, true HEPA filter, moves 400 cubic feet of air per minute, and is designed to cover 1500 square feet. It had no effect. I should also note that during this time we never closed the windows and never turn the exhaust vent off.

I finally called FEMA in desperation explaining all of the remedies I had tried and asked one more time for help, but they again refused. So I pleaded with them to at least come out and test the camper. Again, they refused to help. Finally, I told FEMA that I would find a way to test my own camper and would let them know when I had some results to prove what we already knew was true, our camper was toxic.

So I started looking for testing equipment but found most of the testing equipment available is cost prohibitive with units costing as much as \$3,000.00 dollars and I just did not have that kind of money. Finally I found a company, American Chemical Sensors out of Boca Raton, Florida who sold formaldehyde test kits that are designed to be worn on the clothing. These test kits are worn in industry to measure workers exposure to dangerous chemicals. What I discovered is that OSHA requires that workers who are around formaldehyde be tested for exposure because the EPA lists formaldehyde as a carcinogen, but FEMA didn't seem to be concerned about putting Katrina victims in formaldehyde laden campers.

When I explained to the people at American Chemical Sensors what was going on and what our symptoms were they were genuinely concerned and actually told me I should leave the camper immediately; that the symptoms my wife and I were having indicated formaldehyde poisoning. Fearing for our health, they agreed to send me a test kit free of charge so we could determine how contaminated our FEMA camper was. I received that test kit, hung it in the camper, and sent it back to American Chemical Sensor. The results were ready within days and my camper came back at .22 ppm, twice the EPA's safe limit. The EPA limits formaldehyde exposure to .1 ppm for an 8 hour work day, but my wife and I were spending days at a time in the camper with almost no break. I work from home and since the storm my wife has not worked, so we were being exposed to 2 times the safe limit for almost 3 times the safe duration.

I called FEMA immediately, told them that our camper tested over 2 times the safe limit for formaldehyde exposure, and asked for a new camper. At the same time I also asked them how they planned to test other FEMA campers along the coast because I knew I could not be the only camper out there with this type of contamination. FEMA responded that I should "be happy to have what I have" and told me that "we do not have any more campers available so you will have to make due with what you have".

I could not believe what I was hearing, FEMA was telling us that we should be happy to have a cancer causing camper and that they were going to doing nothing to address the issue. I told the people at FEMA that if they did not help us, if they did not publicize a testing program, that I was going to do everything in my power to get as much press around this issue as I could and just maybe that might force them to act. FEMA still refused to help.

During this time I also started digging around to see if I could find anything about FEMA and formaldehyde on the Internet and came across some OSHA tests results dated October 11, 2005, 43 days after the storm, [http://www.osha.gov/katrina/lisareports/gandv\\_combined.html](http://www.osha.gov/katrina/lisareports/gandv_combined.html). The tests OSHA conducted tested for all kinds of toxic and dangerous chemicals including formaldehyde. One test in particular was conducted at FEMA trailer holding center in Pass Christian, Mississippi and revealed formaldehyde levels in outside ambient air as high as 5 ppm, not .5 ppm, but 5 ppm. This was outside ambient air that was being contaminated by the off gassing of the formaldehyde from inside the campers. I was shocked and scared, if OSHA knew this was an issue, then FEMA must also know, and that means that this entire time I was fighting in futility. FEMA already knew the trailers were contaminated and decided to deliver them anyway, this was a shocking revelation for me.

I finally decided to call our local television station, WLOX, and ask reporter Al Showers if he would do a story on the issue. He agreed but was also a little concerned because he also lost his house during the storm and was also

living in a FEMA trailer and both of us had already heard stories about campers being taken away from people and some living back on their slabs. Al and I feared if we did the story we could be next, but neither of us could sit back and let people get sick without doing something.

The story ran at ten o'clock that evening and at 8am the next day I got a phone call from FEMA informing me that they were on the way with a new camper. Needless to say I almost fell over but asked them to wait one day because I had to empty the old camper. I spent the next half day packing our clothes, dishes, bedding, TV, etc. and loading it back into my car and storage trailer.

During this time I also received a call from The Sierra Club. They were interested in my results and wanted to try and expand testing to other FEMA campers. I agreed to help them and working together we tested 68 campers and 60 of them had hazardous levels of formaldehyde over the EPA's .1ppm...88% of the campers the Sierra Club tested were not fit to be lived in.

FEMA arrived early the next day and workers immediately tried to cut my sewer and water lines, but I stopped them. At this point I had a distrust of FEMA and wanted to see the "new" trailer before they took the old one, it was a good thing I made them wait. The trailer that FEMA brought was another Gulf Stream Cavalier and I could smell the formaldehyde from outside the camper. I opened the door and went inside and was only able to last a minute before I had to get out. Even the workers who delivered it said there is no way they could stay inside. I refused delivery and sent the workers away. Later that day I got a call from FEMA and the woman told me that she wanted to speak with me about my camper and wanted to record the conversation. I refused. Why does FEMA want to tape my conversation?

I was asked questions like, "what are we going to have to do to make you happy" and "so you didn't refuse it because of the type of camper it was" inferring that the camper they delivered was somehow not "nice" enough for us. I told FEMA that all we were trying to do was get a safe place to sleep. FEMA said that they would contact us in a few days and would try to resolve the problem.

FEMA called soon after and said that they will be bringing a new camper that has already been inspected by numerous people at FEMA and has no formaldehyde smell. I was timidly optimistic and the next day the trailer arrived. FEMA representatives showed up early and again wanted to cut my sewer and water lines but this time there were close to 15 FEMA representatives on site. A woman who stated that she was a Public Relations Specialist with FEMA told us that she personally inspected the trailer that was coming and that it was brand new and loaded with options. We really didn't care about the options and actually liked the layout of the original camper; all we wanted was something safe. The woman convinced us to let the workers take the old camper and with that they cut the sewer and water lines a pulled

the camper out of the driveway. I found it interesting that once our FEMA camper was pulled out of our driveway, some of the FEMA representatives started taking pictures of everything. Then I overheard one of the FEMA representatives on the phone and they stated "okay, I make sure that no one goes in it" and with that yelled out to the workers that no one was allowed inside the camper. The FEMA representative also told the driver who was towing the camper that when he got back to the holding center the camper was to be placed in a special place per the person they were talking to on the phone. I have worked in police work for many years and what I was seeing take place looked very much like preserving evidence and maintaining a chain of custody. I felt like a criminal.

Within the hour the replacement camper arrived and we were very excited to see it coming down the street. The workers soon set to work setting up the camper while the Public Relations woman kept my wife and I busy telling us over and over again how pretty the new camper was.

By now it was getting dark and the workers were finishing up, so we finally got to enter the camper. It was immediately evident to us that this was not a new camper, but was actually a used camper. Surface dirt was everywhere, stove was greasy, floors were dirty, bathroom tub was moldy, but we didn't smell any formaldehyde. The Public Relations woman told us that she had to leave at which time I told my wife that if we started now we could probably get it clean in time for bed. So we start cleaning, I took back the bedspread to start making the bed and immediately noticed bugs in the bed. Not long after I noted that the kitchen sink was leaking all over the floor and that the sewer holding tank was clogged. I tried to call FEMA but the Public Relations woman I called told me it was too late in the evening on a Friday to do anything and that we would have to wait until Monday morning to get the issues resolved. I told her that we couldn't sleep in a bug infested bed. She told me that she would have to call me back and about an hour later called and told me that she could put us in a hotel in Pensacola Florida for one night if we wanted. I informed her that it was already after 10pm and it would be almost 2am by the time we get to Pensacola and that it would be too difficult to go there for one night. I told her that if we could not find a place to stay that my wife and I would have to stay in our truck. She told me that if we stayed in the truck that it would be our decision but wanted to make clear that FEMA was offering to put us in the hotel for the night. So began 5 days of living back in our truck.

Not longer after this, and while still living in our truck, I was visited by two FEMA representatives. They showed up on Sunday night around 8pm and wanted to see the camper. One person identified himself as the head of the Mississippi camper program and said that FEMA will fix the problems. He stated that our camper should never have been delivered in that condition and he would have it cleaned even if he had to rip out the furniture and have a crew of 10 work for 2 straight days to get it done. During our talk I asked this FEMA representative where he was living and he told me that he was

living in a gutted apartment in Gulfport, not a FEMA camper, a gutted apartment in Gulfport. I thought to myself, so the head of the Mississippi FEMA Trailer Program is not only taking up scarce rental housing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast but he is also smart enough to know NOT to stay in a FEMA trailer.

For the next few days we tried unsuccessfully to resolve our differences with FEMA. Finally the pressure and delays became too much. My job was on the line, it had been weeks of living in my truck and unable to work, our health was at issue choosing between a formaldehyde contaminated trailer or an unsanitary truck with no restroom facilities, move and allow FEMA force us from our home, or try to find my own camper. I decided to take the insurance money that I should have used to rebuild my home and decided to purchase my own camper and ordered FEMA off my property.

I purchased a 36 foot 5<sup>th</sup> wheel with 3 slide outs, a fireplace, two a/c units, a king size bed, washer/dryer, television, DVD player, built in surround sound, computer work station, two recliners, and a queen size pull out sofa for \$50,000.00. The camper was delivered to my home and setup for free. It came with a one year bumper to bumper warranty, a 10 year warranty on the roof, 20 years on the frame, and an average of 3 years on the appliances. My question to FEMA has always been how they can justify a \$55,000.00 to \$65,000.00 cost for the Gulf Stream Cavaliers that they purchased in response to the Katrina disaster. Not only was it a financial waste it has ultimately sickened thousands along the Gulf Coast.

As I sit in front of you today I know that my wife and I are some of the lucky ones. Unlike tens of thousands on the Gulf Coast, we were able to remove ourselves from a dangerous and life threatening situation and are today, safe. We often think about where we might be if FEMA had never entered our lives or what it might be like if we had the money back that we were forced to spend to make ourselves safe. We worry a great deal about the future and what health consequences we may face as a result of our time in our FEMA camper. We have lost a great deal through our dealings with FEMA, not the least of which is our faith in government. We now know the sad truth that "a culture of life" is only rhetoric and in the real world you are on your own.