

**Prepared Remarks of
James D. Harris, Jr.
Before the
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

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I would first like to thank God for truly blessing me to be here today before you at this time in our history. I would like to thank the Chairman and the Members of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee for the opportunity to share my experiences with you at this time. My name is James D. Harris, Jr. I am 46 years old and I have been blessed with a wonderful wife of 17 years named Aretha. God saw fit to bless us with a son of 6 years old and his name is James D. Harris, III, but we call him Tre'. I am self employed with Agapetre' Graphics & Marketing Group and I am also a Minister of the Gospel. I have been blessed to be in the ministry for over 20 years focusing those efforts mainly in the Southern Region of the United States. My small business was established in 1999 and continued to grow until the disaster known as Hurricane Katrina came on the Gulf Coast. Since the Hurricane, my business has diminished and my ability to prosper from that endeavor has been hampered by the overall economic recovery here on the Gulf Coast. I was blessed to start a non-profit organization named The Guardian Angel Adoption Program with a website address of www.GuardianAngelProgram.org and it has been a blessing to many families here on the Gulf Coast. The non-profit endeavor was formed after witnessing the unfortunate oversight of many families and seniors who were tragically being left out of the recovery and rejuvenation efforts of some of the other agencies here on the Gulf Coast. There is still a great need for services like these to meet the needs of the public at large especially here on the Gulf Coast.

If someone would have told me three years ago that I would be living in a FEMA Travel Trailer with my wife and son, I would have believed them to be inaccurate. But the reality is that I am in a FEMA Trailer and have been living here since April 2006 until now. Many people that I have come in contact with are in the same position that I and my family are in now. I must state for the record, that I am thankful to have a roof over my head and shelter from the elements. This sometimes overlooked necessity is truly a basis for sustaining our existence and maintaining some normalcy in day to day living. By nature, I am one not to complain about my circumstances or my situations that I find myself in from time to time. God has allowed me the strength to endure and to maintain as much as possible and especially during these trying times after Hurricane Katrina. I have never witnessed first hand in my life the overpowering devastation that one event could have on so many people. With all that being said, my life has changed as have so many others during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina... and I will never be the same ever again!

My family and I have experienced many challenges in pursuit of getting the FEMA Trailer we now have. Time will not permit me to address some of those challenges in fact, but I will say that they have exercised every bit of my knowledge, experience and plan old luck to get positioned to be in this facility at this time. When my family and I entered into the trailer in April 2006, we noticed a pungent and overpowering odor that permeated throughout the whole of the FEMA Travel Trailer. You must understand that the three of us are living in a space less than 50 square feet. There is one bathroom and only one door for access in or out. We also noticed that our eyes burned and watered as we tried to inhabit the trailer facility. We were told by the persons who gave us the keys to the trailer initially that if we opened the door and windows of the trailer and allowed the trailer to "air out" for a period of a couple of hours, that all of the odors and the burning sensations of our eyes would pass and would not come back. Over a period of time and to this date, we have found that this remedy did not remove the strong odors that we now know to be formaldehyde.

On many occasions, my wife and I contacted the FEMA Maintenance number to register our concerns and express our displeasure in the frequency and the magnitude of the odors and the visual challenges that being in the trailer presented when these conditions existed. The reply we received from the FEMA Maintenance Call Center was the same, stating, "You need to allow the trailer to "air out" when you smell these odors". There was never any attempt that I know of to physically try to address this concern. There were other physical conditions that have arisen inside the trailer and outside of the trailer, and they have for the most part been addressed, but this particular issue seems to have continued to be addressed to us in the same fashion. Now you must understand that my family and I stayed in one room on the north side of my parents' home after Hurricane Katrina. The southern exposure of my parents' home was compromised and destroyed by the Hurricane's fury. My parents', my brother and his wife and two sons and my family existed in the remnant of my parents' home for 8 months, so when we finally were able to get a FEMA trailer, we were so thankful and continued to try to make things work.

I never realized until late that we may have a possibility of being moved into another more adequate and more environmentally safe trailer. Not being aware of that fact, I know that this is one of the main reasons why after notifying the FEMA Maintenance Call Center about the formaldehyde and how it was affecting us on numerous occasions, we just decided to make the best of the situation. I must note at this point that we noticed often that the companies that FEMA was contracting the maintenance of the trailers to changed almost every other week. This frequent "changing of the guards" I believe directly affected the way in which this situation was handled and was eventually never truly addressed. I would notice along with my wife that if we ever left the home for more than 5 or 6 hours when we returned the smells and odors would sometimes be overpowering. This means we have had to "air out" the trailer on several occasions, losing time while we were waiting for the air quality to resume to some level of acceptability and we figured this was to be our accepted existence in this FEMA trailer. This has happened many times during our occupancy of the trailer. When I felt that no other avenue was available to me, I had to find a way with God's help to make the air quality in the trailer the best that I could. I purchased an Oreck XL Tabletop Professional Air Purifier in July 2006 for \$469.95. I had to borrow the money to purchase the air purifier, but I did what I felt I had to do to protect and help my family to exist day to day. Without this filter, I do not know what our physical condition would be right now.

Since we have been in the trailer, we had to utilize a nebulizer for our son on several occasions and my wife and I believe this goes directly to the lack of air quality at times in the trailer. My wife has also had a few bouts with breathing and I have had several respiratory incidents the latest of which just occurred on Thursday, July 12, 2007. The smell of the formaldehyde was strong and very overwhelming and of course, my eyes and my family's eyes were discomforted and we had to open up the door and windows of the trailer for two and a half hours. My wife sister and her family were here to visit us and the situation was not very hospitable. Thank goodness that we were able to visit in my parents' living room. After that day my chest started to hurt and I suffered acute pain in my lungs and chest areas respectively. This lingered for several days and I finally ended up in the emergency room on Tuesday, July 17, 2007 with those same chest pains and upper respiratory issues. I was discharged that evening with no heart maladies, but I do have a slight respiratory infection that the doctor prescribed medicine for the remedy of the onset. Pain medication, anti-inflammatory medication and finally an anti-biotic was prescribed to me to clear up the infection in my body. I was asked what I had breathed to cause this and I told them about the trailer episode. The staff acted accordingly to this situation. I have come into contact with several other families that have had issues with the formaldehyde presence in their respective FEMA provided shelters. I cannot recall anyone who does maintenance or inspections addressing the formaldehyde issue with us verbally or in writing. Communication has been a big hurdle in reference with this whole life experience and lack of continuity on getting with someone who could address the challenge, assist us in this situation and finally bring forth a remedy that would allow us to have a safe-transition to our permanent residence after this life-changing crisis.

This has truly been a test of our make-up and our ability to adapt to our environment as it is. This is a position that I do not wish upon anyone... let alone my own family, but this again has been the cards that have been dealt to me...so I have attempted to make lemonade. I know that there are so many others who have dealt with these and other similar situations and to them; I take my hat off respectfully and I pray for all of them on a constant basis. I am not sure why I am in this situation presently, but if my remarks and observations can assist in bettering someone else's life or existence, then my efforts are truly worth it all. Thank you for this opportunity to share with you a part of my existence and experience with this issue of formaldehyde and the challenges that this unfortunate situation brings. God Bless and keep is my prayer.