

Lawmakers examine current state of Florida's affordable housing fund



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TALLAHASSEE -- As tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans displaced by Hurricane Maria continue to stream into Florida, a key Senate panel spent Wednesday exploring whether the state's affordable housing programs are being adequately funded.

- **Affordable Housing Trust Fund helps subsidize homes for low-income renters**
- **More than \$1 billion diverted from fund over past decade**
- **Currently fund balance can only meet 1/5th of statewide demand**

The question is more than academic. While many storm-weary Puerto Ricans whose homes have been destroyed are moving in with family members on the mainland, thousands of others are in search of housing.

With their finances unable to match the steep rents being charged in Florida's largest cities, the evacuees are turning to the state for help.

Florida's affordable housing trust fund is the state's primary vehicle for subsidizing homes and apartments for low-income renters in need. Over the past decade, however, state leaders have diverted more than \$1 billion from the fund to pay for other priorities.

That has left the fund with a whittling balance, a reality that became the focal point of Wednesday's meeting of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Tourism and Economic Development.

"Did we have sufficient workforce housing and affordable housing before these storms?" Sen. Perry Thurston (D-Ft. Lauderdale) asked a presenter.

The inferred answer was 'no.' Because the trust fund is now only capable of meeting one-fifth of statewide demand for affordable housing, even some low-income Floridians whose homes were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Irma could find themselves on their own.

"This has been a problem all over the state for many years, but they were particularly hit very hard, and hopefully you'll bring us a plan that will be very aggressive on how to fund workforce and affordable housing in the Keys," said the committee's chairman, Sen. Wilton Simpson (R-Spring Hill).

What the funding issue means for the Puerto Rican arrivals is still unclear. Some lawmakers are suggesting using money from the state's reserve account to replenish the affordable housing trust fund, calling the situation a qualifying emergency.

"We'll have to make it be enough, and if not, we'll have to figure out how we may have to use some other funds to put in the pot to make it work," said Sen. Audrey Gibson (D-Jacksonville). "We have to make it work. We cannot add to the homeless population."

But with the state almost certainly facing a deficit due to impacts from Hurricane Irma, much of the reserve funding could itself be diverted to other areas of the budget. That would make it exceedingly difficult for the state to offer additional relief to storm-weary Puerto Ricans struggling to reestablish their lives in Florida.