

After Disaster: Unique Recovery Needs Call for Renewed Federal Advocacy



Boulder County experienced an historic flood in September 2013 resulting in catastrophic damage to homes, businesses, and properties, as well as massive debris deposition on roadways, in streams, and on public and private property. Boulder County's mountainous geography presents unique flood recovery challenges for residents living in the canyons for whom the flood destroyed the bridges, roads, and driveways that provided sole access to their

homes. Close to 200 residential accesses across Boulder County were damaged in the flood, including 75 bridges that were completely destroyed.



The Boulder County Home Access Program was created to respond to county residents' unique need for flood recovery assistance to restore access to their homes. This program is the first disaster recovery program to utilize funds from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's ("HUD") Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery ("CDBG-DR") to provide grants to residents for the rebuilding of private bridges, roads, and driveways that serve full-time private residences. Since the program was launched in 2014, staff have awarded more than \$6.6M in grants to Boulder County's flood-affected families, and will continue to issue awards and complete projects through December of 2018.

At program launch, staff were immediately faced with barriers that prevented approximately 2/3 of applicants from being eligible for the program. HUD originally mandated CDBG-DR funding only serve owner-occupied households with a demonstrated financial need; rental properties, households with incomes over 80% area median, and vacation homes were therefore excluded from grant eligibility. Furthermore, the original guidelines would have provided 100% grants to some families, and massive mortgage-sized loans to others, potentially even within the same project. These issues were exasperated by the high number of private bridges in the mountains shared by three or more households; if only one of those households was found ineligible or refused to participate, the entire project was stalled indefinitely. Staff needed a means to ensure that interested and eligible households could receive grant assistance regardless of their neighbors' status. Unfortunately, in the year or so following the flood while Home Access was gearing up, some affected households gave up hope and moved away from the community, foreclosed on their properties, or installed unsafe and unpermitted "homemade" bridges.

Working as quickly as possible, staff presented countless memos to State and local CDBG-DR and HUD program officials, advocated to elected officials, and hosted tours of flood-affected properties for elected officials, and State and Federal program staff. After a year of dedicated advocacy, the CDBG-DR guidelines were revised to function as a grant-only program capable of serving nearly all Home Access aid recipients, regardless of the number of eligible participating users on a shared structure or at the expense of low-income residents with high-income neighbors.

By its very nature the Home Access Program is innovative. It is the very first of its kind in the nation. However more than an innovative program, this program represents the cumulative efforts of a highly effective team of planning and program management professionals that have overcome significant barriers to aid in the flood recovery efforts of the Boulder County community.

