

## US House passes bill to help storm-ravaged houses of worship rebuild

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Washington

Many churches "were the only shelter available to people who lost their homes" during Hurricane Sandy, said Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., in arguing for federal assistance to help houses of worship still trying to recover from the storm.

On Feb. 13, the House of Representatives passed a bill in a 354-72 vote that will allow Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster funding to go to churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and other houses of worship.

"Organizations should not be denied federal assistance in times of need just because of their religious affiliations," said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y.

Co-sponsored by Reps. Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Grace Meng, D-N.Y., the Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act of 2013 will provide federal assistance to all nonprofit organizations, regardless of religious affiliation.

"Current FEMA policy is patently unfair, unjustified and discriminatory and may even suggest hostility to religion," said Smith. "It is unconscionable that foundational pillars of our communities damaged by Sandy ... have been categorically denied access to these otherwise generally available relief funds."

The bill must now pass the Senate before it may be signed into law by the president. A measure supported by large numbers of Republicans and Democrats alike, it has been endorsed by a wide variety of organizations from the National Association of Evangelicals to the Jewish Federations of North America to the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops.

"There's no constitutional reason why houses of worship, which often are the first to provide timely disaster relief to hard-hit communities, should be categorically banned from receiving funds to repair buildings," said Daniel Blomberg, legal counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

The Becket Fund provided a detailed legal analysis of the Establishment Clause for Smith to show that the bill was in line with the Constitution.

"Your proposed bill will not violate the Constitution but will instead protect it," the analysis concluded.

In October 2012, the super-storm Hurricane Sandy knocked out power and flooded large portions of the New Jersey-New York coast, toppling trees and destroying many homes and businesses.

On Jan. 29, President Barack Obama signed into law a \$50.5 billion emergency measure for victims of Sandy, which enveloped large regions of New York and New Jersey last October. But because of FEMA regulations, many religious organizations have not received federal funding to aid with cleanup.

"The wind and waves did not discriminate when it came to destroying property. The houses of worship are the very bedrock of the neighborhoods now trying to rebuild. To not offer natural disaster assistance grants to rebuild a house of worship just doesn't make any sense," Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York told *The Wall Street Journal*.

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