

TRI-STATE AREA

# Superstorm Sandy Recovery Shows U.S. Still Unprepared for Major Disasters

Holly Leicht, official who oversaw federal funding behind NYC's Sandy recovery efforts, is speaking for the first time about what went wrong



Holly Leicht was a key federal official in Sandy recovery efforts. PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

*By Mara Gay*

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The former Obama administration official who helped oversee the funding behind New York City's superstorm Sandy recovery program says the U.S. in many ways remains unprepared for major disasters and the recovery that follows.

Holly Leicht, who served as regional administrator for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Barack Obama, is speaking out for the first time about what went wrong in the wake of Sandy, and how federal, state and local governments can improve their approach to handling natural disasters in a report obtained by The Wall Street Journal. The report comes more than a decade after Hurricane Katrina and nearly five years after superstorm Sandy.

"We need to go beyond the very incremental improvements that have been made disaster-to-disaster," Ms. Leicht said in a phone interview recently. "These are policy decisions that need to

be made when you're not in the throes of disaster.”

The report, which was commissioned by the Community Preservation Corporation, Inc., a nonprofit, and the office of the Staten Island Borough President, is expected to be presented at a disaster recovery symposium in Manhattan on Wednesday.

It lays out a series of 41 recommendations for federal, state and local governments dealing with natural disasters.



This property in the Breezy Point section of Queens is one of several hurricane-affected homes in New York City which benefited from the NYC Build it Back program. PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

It also tells the story of the complex patchwork of disaster recovery initiatives set up to help Americans recover in New Jersey, New York state and New York City, where the October 2012 superstorm killed more than 80 people and caused billions of dollars in damages.

Ms. Leicht oversaw more than \$15 billion in federal disaster recovery funds. She said government agencies like HUD, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Small Business Administration should consolidate their efforts to make it easier for victims to get help by accepting requests for aid through a single application. She also said agencies like HUD should be more hands-on with local recovery programs to help states and cities find the best approach to rebuild.

In New York City, where Ms. Leicht helped oversee more than \$4.2 billion in federal dollars toward Sandy recovery, much of the funding went to Build it Back, the city's program to rebuild and elevate homes damaged by Sandy. The initiative began under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg and has continued under Mayor Bill de Blasio. It is behind schedule and at least \$500 million over budget, despite serving less than half of the homeowners it was designed to.

Ms. Leicht said the city had dedicated impressive resources to storm protection projects. But she said it should change its approach to rebuilding housing in future disasters.

She said it should consider adopting an income cap for recovery programs, and that the decision to help all homeowners regardless of income had left less money to serve those most in need. She also said it had limited the city's ability to fund storm protection projects or affordable housing.

Ms. Leicht also said that city officials didn't follow the advice of HUD officials who had repeatedly encouraged them to centralize the management of its recovery programs, which are run by at least five different agencies and two deputy mayors.

A spokeswoman for Mayor de Blasio said the city's approach, "promoted high-level accountability while also capturing critical agency know-how."

"We brought the full weight of City resources to bear on a \$20 billion recovery effort, one that spans business and housing recovery, infrastructure improvements and coastal defenses," said Melissa Grace, the spokeswoman.

Ms. Leicht said there were lessons at every level of government.

"We were all learning as we went," she said. "Still, I'd wager none of us would do things exactly the same if we had it to do over again."

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### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Holly Leicht served as regional administrator for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Barack Obama. An earlier version of this article spelled her name incorrectly in the caption and deck. (July 18, 2017)

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