

## FEMA DECISION

Mr. President, the other issue I want to speak about today very briefly is that I want to commend the administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a decision they just made. That decision was to make houses of worship eligible for Federal disaster aid. This is in line with legislation that I introduced in September of last year. Senator GILLIBRAND and I introduced this legislation after the impact of Hurricane Sandy on houses of worship.

FEMA's Public Assistance Program provides financial grants for the repair, reconstruction, and replacement of private nonprofit facilities—private nonprofit facilities. However, until yesterday, houses of worship were ineligible for FEMA public assistance grants.

As we saw last year, houses of worship—churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places—are critical institutions within communities. They help feed people in need and, in trying to respond to disaster, they provide comfort and shelter during those disasters. FEMA not only did the right thing by making houses of worship eligible for disaster assistance, it did what our Constitution demands.

According to FEMA officials, the change in policy was prompted by the Supreme Court's ruling in the case of *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*. We have a provision in our constitution which I argued against and other Missouri elected officials filed amicus briefs against where we said our constitution was wrong in finding that religious, not-for-profit organizations couldn't be eligible for State programs simply because they were religious. That is not what the U.S. Constitution says. It is not what the Supreme Court determined State constitutions have a right to do.

So FEMA has taken an important step. I think it is equally important now that we make this policy permanent law. It is the right thing to do. It deserves to be permanently the right thing to do. I am hoping that we see the legislation that I have introduced and that many have cosponsored in whatever is the next supplemental disaster funding. Money is going to be spent. Let's go ahead and properly authorize it, as the Supreme Court said we had every right to do and as FEMA has decided that it is the right thing to do.

We are in a new year. We have new challenges. One of the goals we have is to be sure that we move forward in strengthening our economy, to help those responding to disasters and expanding opportunities for hard-working families. We have done that with regulatory reform, with judges who will determine what the law says, and with a tax bill where people will soon see in their paycheck that it is actually all about hard-working families.

I have an editorial from the Joplin Globe today. A tornado struck a community in 2011, and over 100 people

were killed. According to the Joplin Globe editorial—just to remind me of the numbers—some 28 churches were either destroyed or damaged by the tornado that came through Joplin. A significant number were totally destroyed. I have been to a number of those buildings that have been replaced, but they were replaced without any of the kind of assistance that other not-for-profits would have had.

The Joplin Globe editorial ends with this:

Floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes don't treat churches differently. Neither should FEMA.

Again, I congratulate FEMA for the decision they made on this topic.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Joplin Globe editorial be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Joplin Globe]

## OUR VIEW: FEMA AID FOR CHURCHES

During Joplin's 2011 tornado, some 28 churches were either destroyed or damaged. But those that were still standing quickly opened doors and became centers for those left homeless after this national disaster.

That's why we applaud the Federal Emergency Management Agency's announcement that houses of worship are eligible for FEMA Public Assistance program grants, which provide funding for the repair, reconstruction or replacement of private nonprofit sites.

That's thanks to U.S. Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., who introduced the legislation in September to make houses of worship permanently eligible for disaster assistance. Sen. Claire McCaskill, the Democrat from Missouri, also added her name to the bill in a show of bipartisan support.

Both Blunt and McCaskill, in statements put out on Wednesday, recognize the value churches can play in disasters.

"I'm glad to see FEMA do the right thing by ensuring houses of worship are eligible for disaster aid on the same terms as other nonprofits," Blunt said. "As we saw again last year, houses of worship serve a vital role during disasters, providing shelter, food and other services for families who need it the most."

Previously, houses of worship were ineligible for FEMA Public Assistance program grants. FEMA's announcement on Wednesday means that churches, synagogues or mosques affected by disasters declared on or after Aug. 23, 2017, and for applications for assistance that were pending with FEMA as of Aug. 23, 2017, are eligible for assistance.

Blunt's right. Legislation is still needed to ensure houses of worship remain eligible for disaster assistance under federal law on a permanent basis. Floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes don't treat churches differently. Neither should FEMA.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BLUNT). Without objection, it is so ordered.

## TRIBUTE TO JAMES CHARLES

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, for the past year or so, I have been coming to the floor nearly every week, and I know the Presiding Officer looks at this as possibly his favorite time of the week because he gets to hear a lot of these "Alaskan of the Week" speeches. I know the pages love them. I come to the floor to talk about my State, really brag about my State, and recognize an Alaskan who has made a difference—made a difference in their community, whether it is a small community or a big community in the State, in the country.

I have repeatedly stated—I am sure not all my colleagues agree, but maybe some of them do—that Alaskans live in the greatest State in the greatest country in the world. We certainly have the most beautiful landscapes and all the seasons. I was in Fairbanks and Anchorage over the holidays. It was wonderful. Winter is such a great time in the great State of Alaska. For those who love snow, Alaska is the place to be, so we want everyone to come visit. But it is truly the people and strong communities throughout Alaska that make our State so great—such a welcoming place.

For those of us who live in Alaska, sustainable community is everything. Living in one of the most magnificent places on Earth, also, certainly has its challenges. We depend on each other. Our traditional knowledge, our ingenuity, our warm-hearted nature, and our determination to overcome these challenges is what makes our State great and is often the theme of our "Alaskan of the Week" speeches.

Today I wish to transport you to the village of Tuntutuliak—a village of about 400 people, southwest of Bethel, AK, on the 700-mile long, mighty Kuskokwim River—and introduce you to a truly amazing elder who, for 77 years, has worked tirelessly for his community and for our State. This is James Charles, who is our Alaskan of the Week.

Over the past decades, when there has been a meeting on the Kuskokwim concerning fish or wildlife or subsistence, James has been there helping to create and shape a fishing and hunting community and regulations, not only for the region but for the entire State of Alaska.

James was born in 1940 in a fish camp below Helmick Point on the Kuskokwim River. During that time, Alaska was being devastated by a tuberculosis epidemic. In fact, in the mid-20th century, Alaska Native people experienced the highest incidence of tuberculosis of any population ever. This is one of the many challenges we talk about.

Sadly, the epidemic took James's father, his uncle, and both grandparents, leaving his mother and the community