Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The Bureau of Indian Affairs Aberdeen, SD Area Office responded to the devastation caused by two tornadoes on June 4, 1999, that destroyed houses and other buildings on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Immediately after the disaster, BIA allocated Welfare Assistance and Emergency Assistance Funds to the Pine Ridge Agency to address the immediate need for food, shelter, and clothing, and assisted in the coordination of other emergency relief efforts. Mel Lone Hill, a former tribal vice president, praised the BIA personnel who worked many hours to bring relief to reservation. "All these people have done a heck of a job out there since day one." Hardest hit were the communities of Oglala and Igloo, where residents were treated to high winds and large hail that tore through the communities in southwestern South Dakota causing over $1 million dollars in damage. Over 150 residences are being temporarily housed at the old Pine Ridge High School dormitories while others crowd into already overcrowded homes of relatives. The BIA has so far allocated over $1 million dollars to assist in the relief and rebuilding efforts. But that may not be enough to rebuild the lives of the residents of Pine Ridge.

"Even in the best of times, there is a critical shortage of housing units available on the Pine Ridge Reservation, but losing over 160 homes can make an already unbearable situation much worse. Several families may have lived in the house, are now seeking other places to live where rental units are practically non-existent," said Robert Ecoffey, BIA superintendent, Pine Ridge Agency. Despite the extensive property damage, only one person was killed because of the tornado. Over 255 residents reported injuries and were treated at a makeshift hospital set up and manned by the Indian Health Service. "I want to commend the Agency Superintendent and his staff for the outstanding job of responding to the needs of the people," said Cora Jones, Aberdeen Area director. "I am also very happy with the support the Assistant Secretary Gover and Deputy Commissioner Manuel have shown in trying to help with this unfortunate situation."

In a major decision toward recovery, President Clinton declared the Pine Ridge Reservation a disaster area, opening the door for local residents to get emergency assistance from the federal government. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration is on site assisting local residents with funds for shelter, food, and clothing. The problem is, emergency relief is only available as a way to help the individuals get through the ordeal. The residents still have to confront the problem of what to do because many do not have private insurance to fully replace the housing unit they occupied. FEMA plans to move camper-type trailer onto sites to help relieve the problem of the housing shortage.

To assist in solving the housing shortage caused by the tornadoes, BIA moved to purchase 22 houses from the state of South Dakota that will pay for the relocation costs. But this is not going to solve the housing shortage problem for the people of the Pine Ridge Reservation, who face the challenge of rebuilding their lives. "The Aberdeen, SD Area Office has been authorized to purchase the 22 housing units that are built by state prisoners, the money has been allocated to get them going as soon as possible," said Cora Jones. "Can we afford more. I don't know, we'll have to wait and see what the other government agencies are going to provide in the effort to get these people back on their feet." Jones said. The houses, which were built by prisoners at the state penitentiary, are presently being moved to Pine Ridge, where they will be placed on concrete slabs or foundations.