

House passes bill to give disaster relief to religious groups

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The House Wednesday (Feb. 13) overwhelmingly passed a bill to allow places of worship to receive federal aid to repair their buildings damaged during Hurricane Sandy.

The bill, which garnered strong bipartisan support, is also expected to pass the Senate, and would address what its sponsors consider a discriminatory practice that keeps federal disaster money from religious groups.

Currently the Federal Emergency Management Agency excludes religious organizations but assists privately owned nonprofits. If the bill becomes law, it will make houses of worship eligible for relief on the same terms as other nonprofits.

"Today's debate and vote is about those who are being unfairly left out and left behind," Christopher Smith, R-N.J., one of the bill's lead sponsors, told his House colleagues.

"It's about those who helped feed, comfort, clothe and shelter tens of thousands of victims now being told they are ineligible for a FEMA grant."

The bill passed 354-72, and will cover houses of worship affected not only by Hurricane Sandy, which struck Mid-Atlantic states in October, but also by future natural disasters.

However, some see the bill as a violation of the First Amendment – because it would send taxpayer money to houses of worship.

The Secular Coalition for America, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and like-minded groups urged the House not to pass the bill.

"Although it may not seem easy in times of tragedy to tell those seeking aid that they are ineligible for government grants," wrote Maggie Garrett, legislative director of Americans United, "the bar on the government rebuilding of houses of worship is an important limitation that exists to protect religious freedom for all."

The bill, however, is backed by many national religious organizations, including the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Jewish Federations of North America and the American Jewish Committee.

Nathan Diament, the Orthodox Union's executive director for public policy, said he hopes the bill will pass the Senate as quickly as it did the House.

"We're committed to seeing this project through for the benefit of the houses of worship in our communities, not only for Hurricane Sandy, but future disasters as well," Diament said. —*RNS*