

Private colleges try to cut storm relief red tape

BY SCOTT TRAVIS
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Hurricanes haven't been kind to some of Florida's private colleges and universities.

Private institutions suffered an estimated \$20 million in damage from seven hurricanes in the past two years and faced major headaches trying to get disaster aid, according to the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, a Tallahassee-based group that represents 28 private schools.

They're now asking Congress for help.

Private colleges used to be able to apply directly to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for help in repairing damaged facilities after a hurricane or other natural disaster. But a change in the law in 2000 prevents these schools from applying directly to FEMA. Instead, they have to seek Small Business Administration loans, and if those are denied they can seek

help from FEMA.

The new provision went mostly unnoticed at the time. Private schools started getting outraged after seven hurricanes pounded Florida and the Gulf Coast region in 2004 and 2005. They say this is the only place in federal law where not-for-profit private colleges and universities are treated differently than public institutions.

"The existing law is unfair, discriminatory and unnecessarily adds to the federal bureaucracy in time of need," said Arthur F. Kirk, president of Saint Leo University, which is north of Tampa. Kirk is chairman of the president's council for the private schools' group.

In an e-mail statement, FEMA officials confirmed the procedure for private colleges but said the establishment of the Florida Long-Term Recovery Office in May 2005 has sped up the process for all eligible applicants.

U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami,

has sponsored legislation that would allow private colleges and universities to once again apply directly to FEMA. Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne was one of the hardest-hit colleges, reporting more than \$10 million in damage. The storms blew roofs off 10 buildings and destroyed the floor of one office building, officials said. But money for long-term repairs was delayed by four months due to the federal law, said Jack Armul, vice president for financial affairs.

When school officials sought help from FEMA, they were told to apply for the Small Business Administration loan. But restrictions with the school's bond issues made the college ineligible, Armul said.

"Once we shared that information, we were able to proceed with FEMA," Armul said. "But the process was more drawn out than it needed to be."

Other Florida schools that had faced serious hurricane damage in-

clude Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Warner Southern College in Lake Wales and Webber International University in Babson Park.

Of the private colleges in South Florida, only Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach suffered significant damage, which is about \$1.2 million for the two hurricane seasons. The school had flood damage to several buildings. Becky Peeling, a spokeswoman for Palm Beach Atlantic, said FEMA was helpful but the law made it cumbersome to collect.

Lynn University in Boca Raton, the University of Miami, Nova Southeastern University in Davie and Barry University in Miami Shores suffered little damage, the report states.

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