



Tam Tran | D'Iberville, MS

Tam Tran's voice rises as he explains why he feels abused by the government of the country to which he fled in 1980 from Vietnam.

"I want to let the people know that the FEMA is not doing right for most Vietnamese people," he says. "I feel that's not fair."

Tran, a shrimp fisherman, lived on his boat with his family last year until his brother managed to persuade him that the rolling deck of a working trawler was no place for his wife, who was pregnant with their second child.

Tran moved his wife and daughter into his brother's trailer in East Biloxi—a common enough occurrence among Vietnamese, he explains, who still often live with various combinations of several generations in a single household.

There they lived until Hurricane Katrina swept away his brother's trailer and all their belongings. The storm left Tran's boat damaged but intact, so his family moved back and spent the next several months on board.

Through friends and family, Tran learned about help being offered by FEMA and applied for assistance. FEMA approved his application and sent a \$2,000 check to cover emergency needs like food and medicine. Next came a \$2,357.80 check for housing assistance, followed in due course by a check for \$8,382.83 toward the cost of replacing personal property—furniture, clothing, and other household items. And in February he was able to move his family off the boat and into a FEMA trailer.

For Tran, who was trying to repair his boat so he could resume earning a living, the assistance was a welcome relief.

In mid-April, however, FEMA informed the Trans that after auditing their file, it had determined they were ineligible for help and would have to return all the money—\$12,740.63. Because Tran had been living in his brother's trailer, the letter said, he did not qualify as the "head of household" required under FEMA guidelines, and the trailer had not been his primary address for most of 2005.

Tran, who had already spent the money, submitted an appeal, but FEMA again turned him down. And Tran still can't understand why.

"I'm an American citizen, and I have a right to know what's going on," he says. "Why do I have to pay it back?"

He says he received no indication from FEMA that the living arrangements he described would be problematic. He suggests that federal guidelines seem geared only to the needs of nuclear families, with no allowance for the variety of living arrangements common among Asian cultures.

"I think they forget the Vietnamese," he says.

Tran recently moved his family out of their trailer and into a house in D'Iberville that took four feet of water in the storm and still needs substantial repairs.

And he is once again trawling for shrimp, though he now needs to motor all the way to Louisiana or Alabama to unload his catch. Rising costs and fluctuating shrimp prices have made fishing even more of a gamble than usual, but Tran is undismayed.

"Shrimp is hard work, but I love to work for myself," he says. "And I love Mississippi. I been staying here for long time, and this is my second country. ... I love to live in it."