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Housing grant records after Katrina sought

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JACKSON -- Hoping to get a clearer picture of who's benefiting from Mississippi's post-Hurricane Katrina housing grants, a coalition of advocacy groups has filed public records requests with the agency administering the program.

The records requests were filed by the National Fair Housing Alliance, Oxfam America, The American Civil Liberties Union, Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. They seek information about grant applicants and state contracts related to the housing program.

The Mississippi Development Authority, which oversees Gov. Haley Barbour's Homeowners Assistance Grant Program, has until Sept. 6 to comply. If it doesn't, the groups said they'll consider legal action.

MDA spokeswoman Jennifer Spann said the agency had received the requests and would respond "if what they're requesting is actually in our public records."

Reilly Morse of the Mississippi Center for Justice said his organization wants the quarterly reports that MDA has to submit to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which approved and funded the program. Morse said the requests aren't meant to suggest fraud has been committed.

"It's important to see if we've steered off course from what needs to be done for bringing the coast back," Morse said. "If this information was online, like it is in

Texas, we wouldn't have to bother."

Earlier this month, Barbour said more than \$1 billion in federal funding had been distributed to 13,944 homeowners for the first and second phases of the program.

The first phase of the program provides up to \$150,000 each to homeowners who lived outside the federal flood plain but lost their houses to Katrina's water after the storm struck the Gulf Coast.

The second phase, to cover low-income and working poor homeowners, provides up to \$100,000 for people who had storm surge damage to their primary residence regardless of whether they were insured or whether the property was in a flood zone.

The MDA's Web site shows how many grant applications have been received and how many grants have been paid, but the details are too general, said Debby Goldberg, director of the Hurricane Relief Project at the Washington-based National Fair Housing Alliance.

Goldberg said because the state is using federal Community Development Block Grants for the program, the funds must be used to promote fair housing, and 50 percent of the money has to go to low- and moderate-income residents.

However, Spann said MDA wasn't tracking applicants based on race, gender or location. She also said that no one has been disqualified, since people who do not meet the requirements for the first phase are automatically considered for the second.

In East Biloxi, about 40 percent of the homeowners who were eligible for phase one grants have received some money, said City Councilman Bill Stallworth.

Stallworth, who founded the East Biloxi Coordination Relief and Redevelopment Agency to assist in the neighborhood's recovery, said many of the homes were

undervalued on insurance policies. He said the policies were worth \$50,000 to \$60,000.