When Hurricane Rita turned most of their house into a pile of debris, 63-year-old Nancy Sonnier and her 64-year-old husband, Mitchell, salvaged three walls of a back bedroom and slept in their makeshift shelter for almost two months. They were relieved when FEMA delivered them a trailer right before Thanksgiving 2005, as the retired couple were determined to remain on their Vinton property and rebuild their home themselves.

They noticed a horrible smell when they first entered the trailer, so they opened the windows and doors for ventilation. The winter season was mild, and the Sonniers kept the trailer open most of the time. But when cold spells came and they had to close up the trailer and turn on the heat, the smell inside the trailer intensified. The couple’s sinuses became irritated and they coughed more than usual, but Nancy said it little mind.

“I chalked it all up to stress,” she says.

When they needed a new mattress and FEMA sent representatives out with a replacement trailer mattress, the Sonniers mentioned the smell. “One of them laughed out loud and said, ‘We hear that from all kinds of people. Just open your door and windows,’” she remembers.

Occasionally the couple went out of town to visit Nancy’s parents in Mississippi, who’d lost their home in Hurricane Katrina. When they’d return after being gone for the weekend and would re-enter their trailer, the chemical smell was overwhelming; “It would burn our eyes and burn our throat,” she says. “We couldn’t go inside.”

After her arthritis became more pronounced and she developed insomnia in 2006, a word popped into Nancy’s mind one day — formaldehyde.

“I went to the Center for Disease Control Web site, and it said how formaldehyde is a liquid used for embalming, and then I learned about the fumes and how toxic it was, and that it’s a carcinogen,” says Nancy. “My biggest surprise was that I didn’t put it together sooner.”

The story of toxic levels of formaldehyde in the 120,000 trailers that FEMA supplied to Katrina and Rita evacuees — and the agency’s cover-up of the crisis — is still unfolding. At a minimum, more than 5,000 internal e-mails, many made public on July 19 by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, reveal what committee chairman Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) calls “an official policy of premeditated ignorance.”

For more than a year, Waxman and Democratic Rep. Charles Melancon of Napoleonville had been demanding documents from FEMA on what the agency knew about formaldehyde in the trailers, with little result. Ultimately, the committee had to use its subpoena power to divulge internal communications from the agency.

What the documents show is that FEMA knew about the formaldehyde problem a year and a half ago and engaged in a concerted effort to hide it from Congress, trailer residents, other federal agencies — even its own field staff, which consistently raised the issue to higher-ups. Fearing litigation, FEMA attorneys in Washington stopped the agency’s field staff from admitting the problem, from testing trailers, even from relocating sick individuals who asked to be moved.

One man, dying of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, could not breathe in his trailer — a result, according to his doctor, of formaldehyde causing his lungs to swell. After FEMA failed to relocate him, he moved on his own into a motel. A FEMA staff member wrote to superiors: “He said he had nowhere to go, and he was dying with cancer. He would not go back to the travel trailer as he had a violent reaction to the formaldehyde…” FEMA agreed to pay his motel bill, then FEMA attorneys cut off payment a week earlier than the agency had promised, suggesting he seek help at a “charitable organization.”

Formaldehyde is an extremely irritating chemical, classified as a human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. It is used widely in pressed wood products, particleboard, plywood, fabrics and other items, many of which were used to fabricate FEMA trailers. Scientists have known for decades that high levels of formaldehyde are dangerous and that even low levels can cause respiratory distress and exacerbate underlying chronic conditions. The United States has set no indoor air standard for formaldehyde, but a variety of workplace exposure limits have been adopted. The National Institute for
Occational Safety and Health, for example, recommends that no employee be exposed to air containing formaldehyde above the concentration of 0.1 parts per million for longer than 15 minutes. This is the level at which both NIOSH and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency say adverse health effects can occur. For longer exposure, NIOSH recommends an even lower level, 0.01 parts per million, and use of a respirator. Nearly all testing of occupied trailers done by the Sierra Club and trailer residents have revealed levels of formaldehyde above those limits.

After Paul and Melody Stewart of St. Louis, Missouri, tested their trailer in March, WLOV-TV in March 2006 to complain about high levels of formaldehyde they found testing the air in their mobile home, the Mississippi FEMA staff reacted. James Russo of FEMA wrote his colleagues, saying, “This needs to be fixed today.” Another FEMA staffer suggested random testing of the trailers, indicating in an e-mail “the implications are much too large to not take immediate steps to assure the safety of our residents.” The staff outlined a plan that included asking mobile home manufacturers who received orders for the trailers to conduct random tests on units they had supplied to Mississippi.

Apparentlly the Mississippi staff got one occupied trailer tested on April 5, 2006, on Bonneville. The trailer was occupied by Dawn and Carolyn Smith and their 4-month-old daughter. Dawn Siemann was two months pregnant at the time and concerned about the levels of formaldehyde she might have on her pregnancy. The family had moved into the trailer in February 2006 and immediately experienced burning eyes and feeling ill. After the couple complained to FEMA, the staff coordinated Bonner Analytical Testing of Hattiesburg, Miss., to test the Siemann’s trailer.

The test took eight and a half hours and by the end even the inspector’s eyes were burning. Results showed 1.2 parts per million of formaldehyde in the master bedroom, and 1.2 ppm in the small bedroom. “These data show that both the OSHA and NIOSH limits for formaldehyde were exceeded in this FEMA trailer,” the inspector concluded. The contractor told the Siemanns their trailer was "very dangerous" and they needed to "vacate without delay." That same day, FEMA’s local staff put out a request for bids to test occupied trailers for formaldehyde. Five days later, however, FEMA’s lawyers stepped in and halted the process. The House Oversight Committee searched for some evidence that a contract for testing the trailers had been awarded, but found none. In May 2006, a lawsuit against FEMA and trailer manufacturers was filed in federal court in New Orleans. On May 16, 2006, Aaron Wallis, a FEMA spokesman, issued the agency line on formaldehyde. “FEMA and industry experts have evaluated the small number of cases where odors [odors] of formaldehyde have been reported, and we are confident that there is no ongoing risk.”

Geraldine Cox, an environmental specialist with FEMA’s New Orleans field office, remained unconvinced. In an email on May 29, 2006, she wrote to a FEMA colleague: “Do you have actual evidence from the trailers that show the trailers, especially the ones installed by Bechtel (the ones the Smiths occupied) as being at the highest levels are at a safe level?” The question was sent out to FEMA officials in Louisiana and Mississippi. One responded: “HQ made the determination, airing these units out would be the only steps we take.” Several weeks later, a trailer resident in St. Tammany Parish was told by a FEMA official his trailer was apparently told his neighbor in

the past that he was afraid to use his A/C because he thought it would make the formaldehyde worse,” a Louisiana FEMA staffer wrote in an e-mail on June 27, 2006. FEMA’s Mark Micsak responded, “We have to move past COC [Office of General Counsel] objections to possible testing, and move forward with our safety notice. I believe this issue is well past the point of ‘wait and see.’” But on June 15, 2006, Patrick Preston, a FEMA attorney, had already laid down the law. “Do not initiate any testing until we give the OK.”

Once you get results and should they indicate some problem, the clock is running on our duty to respond to them.”

Nevertheless, members of FEMA’s Baton Rouge Transitional Recovery Office boldly organized a teleconference call with 28 staff at six federal agencies to examine questions raised by the St. Tammany man’s death. The group resolved to take six actions:

- Determine the cause of the man’s death.
- Sample the air in his trailer for formaldehyde.
- Request that the Consumer Product Safety Commission “vet FEMA trailers against the industry standard”.
- Identify an independent, nongovernmental agency to conduct tests of indoor air quality in occupied trailers.
- Evaluate FEMA policy on formaldehyde.
- Ask the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals to compose a fact sheet on formaldehyde for local distribution, particularly in St. Bernard and St. Tammany parishes.

By the next day, FEMA’s general counsel had apparently stopped all but one of these actions. Only the last item—the DHE tight fact sheet on formaldehyde—was actually implemented, and it ultimately was less about formaldehyde than about ventilating trailers. At a minimum, however, it disclosed for the first time that the air inside FEMA trailers may be contaminated.

Meanwhile, FEMA attorney Adrian Sevier fired off an e-mail to FEMA participants in the conference call chastising them for initiating the discussion and warning, “To be moving forward with plans and consulting with other agencies prior to vetting this internally could seriously undermine the Agency’s position in litigation and that is not acceptable.” The only result of the conference call appears to be a warning notice about formaldehyde that FEMA began distributing to some trailer residents last July and August.

New Bern-based Southern Mutual Help Association has worked with approximately 75 families in FEMA trailers in 11 parishes along the coast from Texas to Mississippi. “One of the things that we’re seeing is that there are more and more children who are having allergy problems and respiratory problems,” says SMHA Executive Director Louana Bour. “Because of the closeness and the smallness of the FEMA trailers, there’s a number of people who just can’t tolerate the fumes. We even had one lady who was living in a shed to get out of it.”

U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany of Lafayette, whose district includes some of the parishes hit hardest by hurricane Rita, did not return multiple calls and e-mails for this story.

While FEMA attorneys were trying to keep a lid on any talk of formaldehyde problems in the trailers, an infant died in a trailer in Texas in August 2006. The dead child’s parents blamed the death on formaldehyde, and efforts by FEMA staff in Texas to get trailers in that area tested were blocked: “I talked to Ed Landry in Texas ... and explained ... since there are no standards, testing is meaningless.” A FEMA staff member in Louisiana wrote in a memo.

"If we only knew the cause we can take steps," she wrote. "We are not making the risk associated with testing the trailers in Texas until we are assured that any risk is justified." FEMA said in a statement issued in September 2006 that all trailers had been tested and cleared. The statement said that the agency would work with the Department of Health and Human Services to develop health guidelines for trailers. However, “some trailers remain in use because of the difficulty in finding alternate housing,” the statement said.

FEMA Administrator David Paulison was asked about formaldehyde when he testified on May 15, 2007, before the House Committee on Homeland Security. “The formaldehyde issue was brought to our attention, and we went out and investigated, and used the EPA and other agencies to do testing,” Paulison told Congress. “We’ve been told formaldehyde does not present a health hazard.”

A month earlier, in July 2006, FEMA was already feeling some heat from Reps. Waxman and Melanson. The agency had begun investigating, very quietly, the idea of testing unoccupied trailers in order to achieve its desired result—minimizing the formaldehyde issue. FEMA’s initial discussions with EPA and CDC were not encouraging. EPA staffers told FEMA that their preliminary research indicated that the safe level of formaldehyde in trailers would likely be much lower than FEMA anticipated. In a July 11, 2006, memo to FEMA staff about the testing, FEMA Individual Assistance head Brian G. Haubach wrote that “the levels we find after testing may well be more than 100 times higher than the safe level... even after ventilating the trailers.” One EPA scientist suggested that half the trailers should be tested after they had been up for two weeks, and half should have the air conditioning on for two weeks and then be tested. Most others who

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people, especially children and the elderly, literally could no longer breathe.

"To choose that level as their "level of concern" is incomprehensible," says Mary DeVany, an industrial hygienist who has studied formaldehyde extensively and worked on FEMA trailer cases as a consultant for the Sierra Club. "It's an ethical breach." In DeVany's opinion, "If FEMA's new methodology, if they find levels of formaldehyde in their trailer above 0.05, because all of us [industrial scientists] would agree that people should not be living in levels this high.

As flawed as they were, the FEMA tests did reveal one key fact: By any reasonable FEMA test, a FEMA trailer is likely to contain an unsafe level of formaldehyde. The levels measured in the trailers with the air conditioning running, but without the windows open, were consistently above even what the ATSDR's unrealistically high "level of concern." Yet, FEMA's March press release on the tests announced: "Our investigation of formaldehyde and travel trailers indicated that ventilating the units can significantly reduce levels of formaldehyde emissions." FEMA Administrator David Paulison was asked about formaldehyde when he testified on May 15, 2007, before the House Committee on Homeland Security. "The formaldehyde issue was brought to our attention, and we went out and investigated, and used the EPA and other agencies to do testing," Paulison told Congress. "We've been told formaldehyde does not present a health hazard." On July 19, Rep. Waxman read this statement back to Paulison and asked him if he still stood by it. "We realize, now, we have a problem," Paulison said, but he stopped short of admitting the problem was formaldehyde in the trailers.

Since the hearing, Paulison has announced that an air-conditioned trailer will be conducted by an arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and were scheduled to begin last week. However, when FEMA public information officer James McIntyre was asked how

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FEMA would decide which trailers to test, when testing would begin, and what would be considered a safe level of formaldehyde, be responded. "These decisions are still under discussion and will not be available." (Last week, FEMA announced it had "temporarily suspended the deployment and sales of trailer trailers used in emergency housing while the agency works with health and environmental experts to assess health-related concerns raised by occupants.")

FEMA workers began distributing a "fact sheet" on formaldehyde on the weekend of July 21 to residents in the nearly 65,000 FEMA trailers across Louisiana, Minnesota, Alabama and Texas. The fact sheet lists common symptoms of formaldehyde exposure — burning eyes, nosebleeds, breathing difficulties, fatigue, headaches — reactions many trailer residents know all too well. For the first time, the agency disclosed that "more serious health problems may be caused by extended exposure, including a small but increased risk of some forms of cancer." The fact sheet gives a number to call for more information and encourages residents experiencing symptoms to seek medical attention.

Leaving aside the fact that the majority of trailer residents are without health insurance, and in the New Orleans area doctors are scarce, those who have called the number listed on the sheet have been met with more stonewalling. Lindsay Huckabee’s family has lived in two different FEMA trailers in Kiln, Miss., since December 2005. She testified before Waxman’s House committee that her children are regularly covered in blood from nosebleeds and have suffered a variety of serious respiratory ailments. Huckabee herself was pregnant when she moved into the first trailer and began preparing labor, something several pregnant trailer residents have reported. After receiving the new fact sheet, Huckabee called the number to ask what standards would be used to determine if the trailers were safe for families with children. The FEMA staffer taking the call could not answer Huckabee’s questions, but offered to transfer her to someone who would give her a survey to see if she qualified to have her trailer tested. “I’ve already had my trailer tested,” she said, adding that she knows it is above the 1 ppm “safe” level.

Walter McCord, whose eight-member family is packed into one of a FEMA trailer in Gulfport, called the number because he was concerned about the nosebleeds and breathing problems his children are experiencing. If testing was going to happen, he wanted his trailer tested. After hearing of the children’s health problems, the FEMA representative told McCord, “It doesn’t sound like formaldehyde, sir,” and said he did not qualify for the testing.

Nancy and Mitchell Sonnier have had similarly frustrating experiences with FEMA. After KBLC-1TV in Lake Charles aired a report on the formaldehyde problems in the Sonnies’ trailer, a FEMA rep came out to inspect the trailer. “I asked her if she brought a testing monitor, and she said, ‘No, we don’t do that,’” says Nancy. “She said, ‘She came in and sniffed the air — that was her checking.’

A FEMA spokesman declined to comment on the Sonnies’ trailer complaints, citing privacy concerns, and noted that rental assistance has been offered to anyone who has formaldehyde concerns. “We don’t want rental assistance,” says Nancy. “We need to stay here so we can rebuild our house. We’ve put in a formal request for a monitor with the CDC. The last time a woman from FEMA called, she said there was nothing more they could do for us, and they were closing our file.”

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