

**Advisory Group on Forced Evictions**  
**Fact Finding Mission to New Orleans, Louisiana**  
**July 26<sup>th</sup> – July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009**

**Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath**

**A Primer**

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## Section 1: Introduction

### Katrina Makes Landfall

#### Key Fact and Figures:

- Hurricane Katrina was one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States, killing over 1,800 people.<sup>1</sup>
- Katrina was the largest hurricane of its strength to approach the United States in recorded history; its sheer size caused devastation over 100 miles (160 km) from the center. The storm surge caused major or catastrophic damage along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.
- New Orleans' levee failures were found to be primarily the result of system design flaws, combined with the lack of adequate maintenance.
- Hurricane Katrina was the costliest hurricane in U.S. history, with estimated damages resulting in \$75 billion (2005 US dollars).
- More than seventy countries pledged monetary donations or other assistance. Kuwait made the largest single pledge, \$500 million; other large donations were made by Qatar (\$100 million), India, China (both \$5 million), Pakistan (\$1.5 million), and Bangladesh (\$1 million).
- Hundreds of thousands of local residents were left unemployed, which will have a trickle-down effect as lower taxes are paid to local governments. Before the hurricane, the region supported approximately one million non-farm jobs, with 600,000 of them in New Orleans. It is estimated that the total economic impact in Louisiana and Mississippi may exceed \$150 billion.

At 6 am on August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina reached the City of New Orleans. Storm surges of over 20 feet and 145 mph winds wrecked havoc in New Orleans for 8 hours, breaching the levees and canals and flooding the city. According to the National Science Foundation, levee failures were attributed to design flaws and poor maintenance. In this manner, Hurricane Katrina was both a natural and human-made disaster. It was the worst hurricane to impact the United States in recorded history, killing thousands and leaving tens of thousands homeless or displaced, and in its aftermath exposed widespread poverty, racial and class inequality in one of the United States' most well-known cities.

The Bush administration, through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), had contracted out evacuation planning for New Orleans to a corporation, IEM, Innovative Emergency Management, despite the well researched and developed plan provided by scientists at Louisiana State University (LSU). Dr. Ivor Van Heerden of LSU stated: "We had the science. We had really studied this thing. We knew what was going to go wrong. We had an enormous amount of information, right down to mapping where the gas tanks were and pipelines. Science was basically ignored all the way through the process."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 705 people remain categorized as missing in Louisiana, so this number is not final.

<sup>2</sup> *Democracy Now* interview on August 28, 2006 at

[http://www.democracynow.org/2006/8/28/top\\_hurricane\\_expert\\_says\\_officials\\_threatened](http://www.democracynow.org/2006/8/28/top_hurricane_expert_says_officials_threatened).

Critics have noted that while there was a mandatory evacuation order 22 hours before the storm hit, provisions were not made to evacuate the large numbers of citizens unable to evacuate themselves. For example, Walter Maestri, head of emergency preparedness for Jefferson Parish, stated that FEMA officials had promised that within 48 hours of a hurricane, they would provide assistance with transporting evacuees from the city. However, when Katrina hit, it was mainly left up to individuals to find their own way out of the city.

New Orleans was already one of the poorest metropolitan areas in the United States in 2005, with the eighth-lowest median income (\$30,771). At 24.5 percent, Orleans Parish had the sixth-highest poverty rate among U.S. counties. The 2000 U.S. census revealed that 27% of New Orleans households, amounting to approximately 120,000 people, were without privately owned transportation. Despite these factors preventing many people from being able to evacuate on their own, the mandatory evacuation called on August 28 made no provisions to evacuate homeless, low-income, or careles individuals or households, nor the city's elderly or infirm residents. Consequentially most of those stranded in the city were the poor, the elderly, and the sick.

Hurricane Katrina has been seen as a metaphor for the racial and class inequalities existent in urban America, both in its immediate effects and in the short- and long-term consequences it has engendered. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' population was predominantly Black (67%) and over a third (35%) was below the poverty line; African Americans accounted for 84% of those living in poverty and 54% were renters.<sup>3</sup>

Low-income and African American communities were most adversely impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the policies that followed. 79% of the 142,000 units damaged or destroyed in New Orleans overall had been affordable to low-income residents<sup>4</sup> and 45.7% had been rental units.<sup>5</sup> About half (45.8%) of the population in the most damaged areas was Black, compared to 26.4% in undamaged areas.<sup>6</sup> 20.9% of those in the most damaged areas were below the poverty line, compared to 15.3% in less damaged areas, and 7.6% were unemployed, compared to 6% in less damaged areas.<sup>7</sup>

It is also African Americans and the poor who have been least likely to return to New Orleans. Redevelopment trends and subsequent state, local, and federal policy have contributed to a housing affordability crisis, including a series of forced evictions, which has prevented their return home.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Bullard, Beverly Wright 2009: Race, Place and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina. Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Westview Press, February 24, 2009, Page 141

<sup>4</sup> Browne- Dianis Judith 2008: Exiling the Poor: The Clash of Redevelopment and Fair Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans; Howard University School of Law, Spring 2008

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## PRESS AND MEDIA

### Hurricane Katrina: New Orleans, August 2005

Popular Mechanics

July 31, 2007

by John Galvin

**"DEVASTATING DAMAGE EXPECTED."** By the time the National Weather Service issued this ominous alert on the morning of Aug. 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina had morphed from a relatively weak Category 1 hurricane to a Category 5 tropical monster – and was spiraling straight toward New Orleans.

The city would be "uninhabitable for weeks ... perhaps longer," the weather service warned. Half the houses would lose their roofs. Commercial buildings would be unusable, and apartment buildings would be destroyed. Residents should expect long-term power outages and water shortages that would "make human suffering incredible by modern standards."

In fact, the only outcome the 258-word alert didn't specifically foretell was the massive flooding that would leave most of New Orleans submerged under a fetid stew of water and chemical runoff. But the likelihood of that happening has been well-known for years. The city sits as much as 10 ft. below sea level, between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, and is kept dry by a complicated system of canals, levees and pumping stations. Publications such as Scientific American, New Orleans's Times-Picayune, National Geographic Magazine and Popular Mechanics have all reported on the city's vulnerability in the event of a major hurricane.

National Hurricane Director Max Mayfield was so concerned about the potential consequences of Katrina that he called the mayor of New Orleans, the governors of Louisiana and Mississippi, and even

President Bush at his ranch in Texas. Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans issued a nonmandatory evacuation order by Sunday and, despite later misperceptions, most people left.

Highway lanes were converted to outbound traffic only, and state police estimated that 18,000 vehicles an hour were streaming away from the region by late afternoon. Before Katrina hit, 80 percent of residents had already evacuated; but an estimated 100,000 people remained. Some officials argue that they stayed by choice, but reports on the ground suggest that many residents, and quite a few tourists, were simply stranded. Estimates vary, but 26,000 to 100,000 New Orleans families did not own a car. Greyhound and Amtrak cancelled service into and out of New Orleans on Sunday, and airlines grounded planes at New Orleans's Louis Armstrong airport.

"I know they're saying 'get out of town,' but I don't have any way to get out," said New Orleans resident Hattie Johns, 74, to the Gannett News Service. "If you don't have no money, you can't go." The city established emergency shelters-of-last-resort for anyone who remained, and some 10,000 people waited out the storm in the Louisiana Superdome Sunday night.

When Katrina made landfall at 6 am the next morning, the hurricane had been downgraded to a Category 4. Its eye passed east of New Orleans. This was hardly a reprieve: The storm hovered over the region for eight long hours, ripping houses apart with winds of up to 145 mph. In neighboring St. Bernard Parish, an estimated 40,000 homes were destroyed. Wind and two-story storm surges obliterated many of Mississippi's seaside communities, such as Gulfport and Biloxi, as well. In South Diamondhead, an entire subdivision of 200 homes was washed away. "We rode the house," Don Haller, of Diamondhead, said to The New York Times. Highways were flooded for miles inland, power was out

across the region, and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced.

Though many thought the worst was over, New Orleans was in still more serious trouble. Katrina's 20-ft. storm surge was channeled directly into the city's canals and levees. Three hours after the hurricane hit, a federal official reported that the downtown Industrial Canal had been breached. An hour later, the same was said of the 17th Street Canal. Engineers suspect that in some areas the surge water topped the canals' walls, eroding the earthen foundations. In other areas, the sheer pressure of the surge appears to have destroyed the concrete walls outright. Water from Lake Pontchartrain quickly overwhelmed the pumps and poured into the city.

"We were good until the canal busted," resident Gregory Sontag said to The Times-Picayune, which won a Pulitzer for its reporting on Katrina, which continued even after its staff had to evacuate the offices. "First there was water on the street, then the sidewalk, then water in the house."

By Monday night, low-lying neighborhoods, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, were in a state of total disaster. Daniel Weber sobbed as he told reporters about watching his wife drown as he tried to pull her onto their roof. "My hands were all cut up from breaking through the window, and I was standing on the fence. I said, 'I'll get on the roof and pull you,' and then we just went under." Weber floated on a piece of driftwood for 14 hours before being rescued by one of the many boats plying the flooded streets searching for survivors.

Daybreak on Tuesday, Aug. 30, brought cable news footage that shocked the country. It quickly became apparent that Katrina was the most damaging hurricane in U.S. history. Eighty percent of New Orleans was flooded. News reports of looting, crime, rape and

sniper fire in the wake of the disaster whipped media coverage into a fever pitch. But as Popular Mechanics reported in its March 2006 cover story, "Now What? The Lessons of Katrina," the reports of violence were grossly overplayed, and most looters were simply trying to find food and water.

By Friday the conditions at the Superdome, where the crowd had grown to 20,000 people, forced many out into the misery of Louisiana's infamously stifling heat and humidity. In the meantime, food and water finally arrived at the New Orleans Convention Center, where another 30,000 people had fled. Reporters from The Times-Picayune interviewed people who had waded through "chin high" water, and who told of friends and families vanishing in the flood. Those who remained in the city felt abandoned.

"We're being treated like animals," Donyell Porter, 25, said to a Times-Picayune reporter. "Look around. Man, look at the bodies. And there's no way for us to leave. ... It's not right. We're humans, too."

Most of the hurricane survivors who wanted to leave New Orleans were finally able to get buses out of town on Saturday, Sep. 3. The city they left behind had been nearly wiped off the map, but Hurricane Katrina affected 90,000 square miles in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Well over 1300 people were killed across the region, and bodies were still turning up in condemned homes eight months later. The financial tally as of July 2007 was approaching \$200 billion; some predict it will top \$300 billion after all the checks are written.

### **The Aftermath**

In the days that followed Hurricane Katrina, the wave of sentiment coursing through America was that government had failed across the board. At the federal, state and local level there was



a nearly complete breakdown in communications. Despite the early-warning phone call from Mayfield, nobody seems to have been prepared for or aware of the real extent of the damage. This seemed especially true at the top, where the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported directly to officials at the White House, cutting his superior at the Department of Homeland Security out of the loop.

A bipartisan Senate report, issued in April 2006, was not hopeful about upcoming hurricane seasons. "Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared" cites a myriad of problems at FEMA alone, including a lack of emergency management experience at top levels, years of crippling budget shortfalls and a deficit of experienced frontline personnel to assist in emergencies.

The rescue effort that mobilized in spite of these failings was nonetheless impressive. More than 100,000 emergency personnel were on the scene within three days – many within hours of Katrina's passing. More than 50,000 people were rescued by the Coast Guard and the National Guard, not to mention ordinary citizens who piloted their own boats on impromptu rescue missions throughout the week.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is furiously trying to rebuild the damaged levees and flood walls. Yet, the levee system is responsible for much of the coastal erosion that makes it difficult for the region to absorb the brunt of a hurricane. Many in the private and public sectors are calling for the government to fund long-delayed plans to restore the Mississippi River Delta.

In the short term, Mayor Nagin announced new mandatory evacuation orders for any hurricane above category 1. Citizens with special needs will take public transportation to the convention center and there will be able to ride buses out of town. Amtrak and

Greyhound have pledged to stay open during an evacuation, and commercial airlines are being asked to delay canceling flights. Hotels will be asked to close during a storm, forcing tourists to leave the city.

FEMA, the agency in charge of coordinating the federal response, has vowed to improve communications. Its operations center will now be better linked to Homeland Security. FEMA officials armed with satellite phones will be deployed to state agencies. And to ensure the military knows when its help is needed, Defense Department coordinators will now be assigned to each of FEMA's regional offices.

## **Sure footing eludes Katrina's poor**

**New York Times**  
**December 13, 2005**  
**by Jodi Wilgoren**

**BATON ROUGE, Louisiana** — In the small room where Tracy Jackson, Jerel Brown and their four young children share a twin bed and thin mattress on the floor, nearly everything the family owns is stacked in the closet.

The plastic bin at the bottom holds pants, shorts and belts. Atop it sits a suitcase filled with button-downs and T-shirts. Another suitcase for towels. The girls themselves hold the black-and-white stuffed dogs they got from the Salvation Army and call Snoopy.

"We don't know when we're going to have to pick up and go again," Jerel Brown, 24, said as he smoked a cigarette on the porch.

"It's just surviving, you know."

This is the 14th place the Jackson-Browns have laid their heads in as many weeks, since a fire destroyed their apartment near downtown New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Five shelters. Six hotel rooms. Twelve days in the home of a good Samaritan in a tiny Louisiana town where they were the only African Americans. Six weeks in Durham, North Carolina, in the two-bedroom apartment that a church found for Brown's mother after the storm, where no buses ran nearby and a cab to Wal-Mart cost \$10. And, since shortly before Thanksgiving, this dark room in a shotgun shack here.

The immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed the deep divide between the haves and have-nots of New Orleans, as middle-class families rushed to hotels while the poorest of the poor suffered in the squalor of the Superdome. The divide remains, more than three months later.

Thousands of the displaced have taken significant steps to rebuild their lives, returning to surviving sections of the region or finding new jobs and new lives out of state. But the Jackson-Browns, who are not married and lack high school diplomas, credit cards, even driver's licenses, are among the legions of desperately destitute who remain in limbo.

Their troubled odyssey is one of opportunities missed and squandered, of government money and charitable donations spent partly on a stack of DVDs and costume jewelry, of fumbling to find family without phone numbers, of many days doing little more than waiting for help.

Tracy Jackson's sister, husband and two children - also New Orleans refugees - rent their latest home, in Baton Rouge, for \$600 a month through the federal government's Section 8 voucher program for the poor.

Jackson, 25, long ago applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a travel trailer, but there are 78,000 families

waiting with her for the few hundred units opening in Louisiana each day. Brown longs to return to New Orleans in search of his still-missing brother, but he has no place to stay, no way to make a living, not even a ride into the city 80 miles, or 130 kilometers, away.

So here they sit, Jackson stirring pork and beans when Brown arrives from his new \$7.50-an-hour job at a concrete company. "We're still together, that's the biggest thing, and we're with family," Brown said. "It ain't feel like home until you got your own. You might feel happy, you might feel wanted, but it ain't nothing like your own."

The two older children, ages 7 and 5, have spent a scant five weeks in two different schools - Jackson said she is not enrolling them here because she hopes to send them to stay with her mother in Bogalusa, Louisiana. The \$216.98 paycheck Brown received Wednesday from GlenCo Wastewater, a small company that makes manhole covers and catch basins, was his first since the hurricane, though he has collected some cash for odd jobs. The stress is starting to show: Alexis, 2, was almost potty-trained before Katrina and now wears diapers all day. Anthony, the 3-year-old, mumbles in his sleep. Devont'e, 5, woke up the other night screaming, "Mama, I'm dead!" Waynenisha, who is 7 and mentally handicapped, tried to hit her aunt.

"They just move them from place to place and that ain't good," Brown's mother, Darlene, said after the family left her Durham apartment bound for Baton Rouge. "They don't give nothing time to work out."

The family stayed one night at a church, a few at a junior high school, and several at the Riverfront Center in Alexandria, Louisiana, where the couple say much of their donated belongings were stolen and they watched a shelter resident jump off a bridge to her death. Then they bounced around Alexandria hotels, sometimes staying for free and sometimes paying \$75 a night,

before boarding a bus Oct. 8 to North Carolina, with tickets costing \$498.86.

They ended up the next night in Charlotte, 150 miles and a \$200 cab ride from Darlene Brown's apartment, where they arrived Oct. 10 about 7:30 p.m. and immediately went to Wal-Mart to buy a television (\$109), DVD player (\$39) and a pump for an air mattress. "We be safe now," Brown said that night. "We ain't got to run from pillar to post now. We're with my mama."

Days passed, then weeks. A church volunteer drove Brown to a job fair but, he said, he could not get hired without an education or driver's license.

"Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to talk to," Brown said after one of many days passed in front of the television. "It's another never-never land. You need a car to get around, other than that you're just stuck where you are. They don't even have a bus stop around here."

A week later, Brown said, "I'm just sitting and waiting. The only thing we can do is sit and wait."

Jackson, meanwhile, dialed the FEMA hotline every few days, trying to find out what happened to her \$2,358 in rental assistance; the check apparently was lost in the mail. Eventually, FEMA booked the family on a Delta Airlines flight here - their first airplane ride. Her sister, April Roberts, welcomed them with familial teasing. Her husband Ernil, 32, helped Brown get a job alongside him at GlenCo.

Jackson and Brown said that since the hurricane they have lived off \$2,000 from FEMA, \$2,000 from a private donor, \$1,500 from the Red Cross and \$500 from the Salvation Army, as well as their monthly \$505 in food stamps and \$579 from Social Security for Waynenisha's disability, and occasional handouts from strangers. Brown said he is happy to be working, but still "trying to find out where's my place."

"I ask myself sometimes, how did we make it this far?" he said.  
"Right now is really what they call survival of the fittest.  
Either you're going to stand up and take care of your family or  
you're going to sit there. You got to stand up to make change."

## Section 2

### Katrina's Impact and Forced Evictions

The impact of Hurricane Katrina could be felt in all sectors of New Orleans' life from education to health care, housing to job opportunities. Many have argued that government officials and policymakers used the storm and its aftermath to institute neo liberal, privatization policies they had always wanted to pursue. The immediately policy decisions after Katrina make this assertion difficult to counter.

With respect to public housing, in December of 2007 New Orleans city council approved the demolition of the "Big Four" public housing complexes: B.W Cooper, C.J. Peete, Lafitte, and St. Bernard, which contained about 4,500 units. These public housing communities – which had provided decent homes for New Orleans poor and low income communities – will be replaced with privately-developed, mixed-income units, comprised of only a third public housing units. These new developments will represent an 80% decrease in the total number of public housing units in New Orleans. Furthermore, the mixed-income developments will cost \$400,000 each to produce, whereas simply repairing the minimum storm damage the preexisting public housing units had would have cost only \$10,000 units each.<sup>8</sup>

Public housing residents who returned to New Orleans after the storm were forbidden from entering their homes. Steel shutters were placed over doors and windows and fences were placed around the complexes.<sup>9</sup> To date, plans to demolish public housing are moving forward, leaving former residents in a state of uncertainty as to whether or not they will ever be able to return home.

The only other government subsidy provided to poor and low income families are Section 8 vouchers where residents find apartments on the private market and their rent is subsidized by the government. The number of vouchers distributed to New Orleans residents increased by 80% immediately after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>10</sup> This figure includes those who were already on Section 8 prior to Katrina, temporary vouchers distributed to Katrina survivors who could now not afford to rent in the private market, and previous public housing residents who communities had been demolished. These renters are now forced to find housing in New Orleans' rapidly changing, profit-driven, and highly competitive housing market.

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<sup>8</sup> Candi Johnson: Pre-Katrina residents of New Orleans' public housing units question HUD's plans to continue demolition. University of Southern Mississippi, After Katrina Newswire, <http://www.usm.edu/afterkatrina/Johnson2.html>.

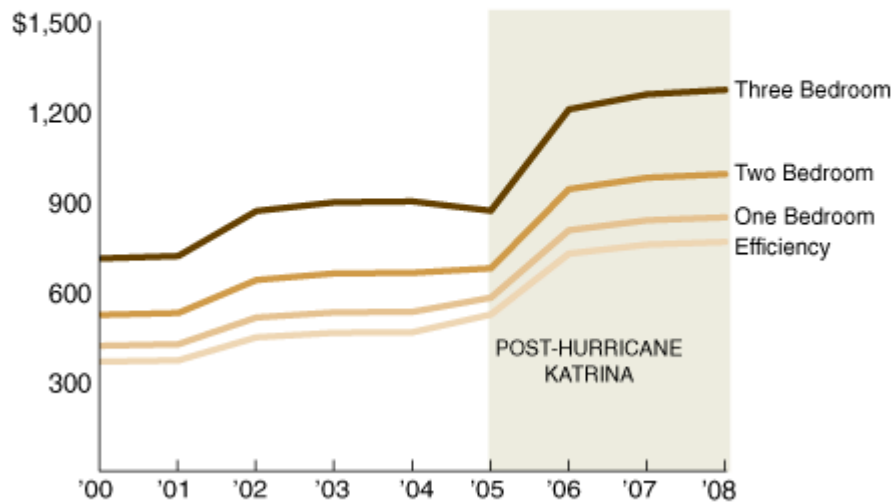
<sup>9</sup> <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/katrinawomenreportfeb2009/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Reckdahl, Katy. "Rate of Housing Aid Up in N.O." *The Times-Picayune* 14 May 2009. 10 June 2009 <<http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/neworleans/index.ssf?/base/news-10/1242279152104030.xml&coll=1>>.

Rents have risen to 52% over pre-Katrina figures, and in January, 2009 studies show that rents increased 4% across the metro area.<sup>11</sup>

## Rent Prices in New Orleans

The average rent has gone up 46 percent in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. The fair market rents shown below, which are based on market rates for modest housing, are for fiscal years starting Oct. 1 of the previous year.



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

The rise in rents can be attributed to reconstruction policy, as well as the profit-driven housing market. According to one PolicyLink report, only 2/5 of the rental units damaged by the storm will be replaced or repaired through reconstruction plans.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the demolition of four out of five of the largest public housing complexes will only help shrink the stock of affordable housing, which is a direct cause of the rise in rents.<sup>13</sup> The increases in rent and demolition of public housing have directly impacted New Orleans' rising homelessness levels.

Since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' homeless population is estimated to have doubled from 6,000 to 12,000<sup>14</sup> and between 5,000- 10,000 people are estimated to be squatting in abandoned residential and commercial buildings. Many are senior citizens, disabled, or both.<sup>15</sup> Studies in 2008 reveal that most (86%) of the homeless in New Orleans were originally from the New Orleans area; 60% said they became homeless after Hurricane Katrina; and 30% had received rental assistance at some point from FEMA, but no

<sup>11</sup> The recent New Orleans Index, published by the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program & Greater New Orleans Community Data Center in January 2009

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=housing\\_new\\_orleans](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=housing_new_orleans)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/katrinawomenreportfeb2009/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/03/us/nationalspecial/03renters.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wvlv.com/video/news-index.html?nvid=314623&shu=1>



longer.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, New Orleans' homeless population now includes the chronically homeless, displaced and returning residents, and workers hired to help rebuild the city.<sup>17</sup> The not for profit organization UNITY of Greater New Orleans has tried moving homeless individuals to shelters, but shelter space quickly ran out.<sup>18</sup> Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had 2,800 shelter beds, but only 2,000 afterwards.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/us/28tent.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=1&sq=hurricane%20katrina%20rental%20assistance&st=cse&scp=4](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/us/28tent.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&sq=hurricane%20katrina%20rental%20assistance&st=cse&scp=4)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080225/ratner>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.wvlv.com/video/news-index.html?nvid=314623&shu=1>

<sup>19</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/us/28tent.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=1&sq=hurricane%20katrina%20rental%20assistance&st=cse&scp=4](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/us/28tent.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&sq=hurricane%20katrina%20rental%20assistance&st=cse&scp=4)

## **PRESS AND MEDIA**

### **A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina: an Intersectional Analysis**

**The Impact of Federal Housing  
Policy: A Second Storm**

**by Rachel E. Luft and Shana Griffin**

While the floodwaters and failed levees significantly impacted the housing stock of the parish, affordable housing advocates point to local and federal housing policy response as the source of an ongoing secondary disaster. Due to occupational gender discrimination and other sources of gender inequity, women are disproportionately in need of low-income housing. Black/African American women's need for affordable housing is the result of the intersection of gender and race inequality as the wages of both Black/African American women and men are considerably lower than those of White women and men. PolicyLink, a progressive think tank, recently released a report in which it calculates that "[f]ederal recovery programs are projected to restore only 43 percent of the city's total rental losses." The rental housing shortage means rents have increased by 46 percent since the storm.

James Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center has challenged federal neglect of renters in its multi-billion dollar allocation for homeowners through the Road Home program. While just half of the almost 200,000 home-owning applicants have received their awards, the fraction designated for rental units goes to landlords for renovation, and not to renters themselves. Into this shrunken housing landscape created by "passive policy"—the lack of federal disaster funds allocated for rental housing recovery—HUD (the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and HANO (Housing Authority of New Orleans) have additionally taken a more aggressive approach when it comes to housing for the lowest income, disabled, and elderly

renters by actively defunding subsidized housing. HUD has designated funds to rebuild just over a third (4,538 units) of the subsidized housing stock. Further, after a two year campaign to demolish four public housing developments (C.J. Peete, B.W. Cooper, Lafitte, and St. Bernard), HUD/HANO began the demolition process in December 2007. Overwhelmingly, public housing leaseholders are women, in this case Black/African American, who are largely heads of households with children. The decision to demolish four of New Orleans' ten public housing developments during a time of housing crisis in the city was contested locally, nationally, and internationally.

Despite the fact that generations of New Orleanians had sought shelter in the projects during hurricane warnings because of their low-rise, sturdy brick workmanship, residents were evacuated along with the rest of the city days after surviving the storm. When they returned to New Orleans they were not allowed back into the developments, and within a few months steel plates were placed over doors and windows. After ten months of limbo for over 4,500 public housing families, on June 2006, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson announced federal plans to demolish the four developments. This decision precipitated local, national, and international resistance. Civil Rights lawyers filed lawsuits on behalf of residents; Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA) successfully passed House legislation (HR 1227) requiring further investigation and a freeze on demolitions, and Senators Christopher Dodd (D-Conn) and Mary Landrieu (D-LA) sponsored its sister initiative, SB 1668, which has been held up in committee ever since by Louisiana's Republican Senator Vitter; critical statements were issued by all three Democratic Presidential candidates at the time; UN Rapporteurs on Internally Displaced People visited the city repeatedly and two UN advisers condemned the demolitions; and a grassroots social movement has arisen in New Orleans that organizes residents and plans public demonstrations.

Despite the variety of concerns voiced by critics of HUD's decision, demolitions have begun on three of the four developments (final permits for Lafitte are pending). The number of units to be rebuilt is highly disputed. HUD/HANO intend to replace the housing developments with mixed-income units in line with broader federal housing policy under HOPE VI, and claim they will replace the pre-storm total number of 6,606 public housing units with 3,343 public housing units, and 5,518 subsidized units with 1,765 subsidized units. Affordable housing advocates claim that while these figures indicate a dramatic reduction in net housing, they also under represent the more significant drop in rental units at what policy makers call deep affordability. Despite using the vague language of low-income housing, HUD has inflated the Area Median Income (AMI) levels, so that its "low-income" threshold is out of reach of the poorest sector. PolicyLink notes that the total number of units available to extremely low-income renters will be a mere 37 percent of the pre-storm pool, while local housing advocates claim it will be even smaller. In this way, they argue, HUD and HANO are engineering policy as to who can and cannot return to New Orleans.

## **HUD to New Orleans Poor: "Go Find Yourself Housing!"**

**CommonDreams.org**

**June 19, 2006**

**by Bill Quigley**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has announced they plan to demolish over 5,000 public housing apartments in New Orleans. In August 2005, HUD reported they had 7,381 public apartments in New Orleans. Now HUD says they now have 1,000 apartments open and promise to repair and open another 1,000 in a couple of months. After months of rumors, HUD confirmed their intention to demolish all the remaining apartments.

HUD's demolition plans leave thousands of families with no hope of returning to New Orleans where rental housing is scarce and costly. In New Orleans, public housing was occupied by women, mostly working, their children, as well as the elderly and disabled.

To these mothers and children, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson said: "Any New Orleans voucher recipient or public housing resident will be welcomed home."

Exactly how people will be welcomed home, HUD did not say.

How can thousands of low-income working families come home if HUD has fenced off their apartments, put metal shutters over their windows and doors and are now plans to demolish their homes?

Jackson, who is likely sleeping in his own bed, urged patience for the thousands who have been displaced since August of 2005: "Rebuilding and revitalizing public housing isn't something that will be done overnight."

Patience is in short supply in New Orleans, as over 200,000 people remain displaced. "I just need somewhere to stay," Patricia Thomas told the *Times-Picayune*. Ms. Thomas has lived in public housing for years. "We're losing our older people. They're dropping like flies when they hear they can't come home."

Demolition of public housing in New Orleans is not a new idea. When Katrina displaced New Orleans public housing residents, the *Wall Street Journal* reported U.S. Congressman Richard Baker, a 10 term Republican from Baton Rouge, telling lobbyists: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

This demolition plan continues HUD's efforts to get out of the housing business. In 1996, New Orleans had 13,694 units of conventional public housing. Before Katrina, New Orleans was down to half that, 7,379 units of conventional public housing. If they are allowed to accelerate the demolition, public housing in New Orleans will have been reduced by 85% in the past decade.

The federal demolition of housing in New Orleans continues a nationwide trend that has led some critics to suggest changing HUD's official name to the Department of Demolition of Public Housing.

Much of the public housing demolition nationally comes through of a federal program titled "Hope VI" -- a cruelly misnamed program that destroys low income housing in the name of creating "mixed income housing."

Who can be against tearing down old public housing and replacing it with mixed income housing? Sounds like everyone should benefit doesn't it? Unfortunately that is not the case at all. Almost all the poor people involved are not in the mix.

New Orleans has already experienced the tragic effects of HOPE VI. The St. Thomas Housing Development in the Irish Channel area of New Orleans was home to 1600 apartments of public housing. After St. Thomas was demolished under Hope VI, the area was called River Gardens. River Gardens is a mixed income community -- home now to 60 low income families, some middle income apartments, a planned high income tower, and a tax-subsidized Wal-Mart! Our tax dollars at work -- destroying not only low-income housing but neighborhood small businesses as well.

Worse yet, after Katrina, the 60 low-income families in River Gardens were not even allowed back into their apartments. They were told their apartments were needed for employees of the housing authority. It took the filing of a federal complaint by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Center to get the families back into their apartments.

As James Perry, Director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Center says about the planned demolition of public housing, "If the model is River Gardens, it has failed miserably." Despite HUD's promise to demolish homes, the right of people to return to New Orleans is slowly being recognized as a human rights issue. According to international law, the victims of Katrina are "internally displaced persons" because they were displaced

within their own country as a result of natural disaster. Principle 28 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement requires that the U.S. government recognize the human right of displaced people to return home. The US must "allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence... Such authorities shall facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration." The US Human Rights Network and other human rights advocates are educating people of the Gulf Coast and the nation about how to advocate for human rights.

HUD has effectively told the people of New Orleans to go find housing for themselves. New Orleans already has many, many people, including families, living in abandoned houses -- houses without electricity or running water. New Orleans has recently been plagued with an increase in the number of fires. HUD's actions will put more families into these abandoned houses. Families in houses with no electricity or water should be a national disgrace in the richest nation in the history of the world. But for HUD and others with political and economic power this is apparently not the case.

As in the face of any injustice, there is resistance.

NAACP civil rights attorney Tracie Washington promised a legal challenge and told HUD, "You cannot go forward and we will not allow you to go forward."

Most importantly, displaced residents of public housing and their allies have set up a tent city survivors village outside the fenced off 1,300 empty apartments on St. Bernard Avenue in New Orleans.

If the authorities do not open up the apartments by July 4, they pledge to go through the fences and liberate their homes directly. The group, the United Front for Affordable Housing, is committed to resisting HUD's efforts to bulldoze their apartments "by any means necessary."

If the government told you that they were going to bulldoze where you live, and deny you the right to return to your home, would you join them?

## **HUD Demolitions Draw Noose Tighter Around New Orleans**

**CommonDreams.org**

**September 26, 2007**

**by Bill Quigley**

Odessa Lewis is 62 years old. When I saw her last week, she was crying because she is being evicted. A long-time resident of the Lafitte public housing apartments, since Katrina she has been locked out of her apartment and forced to live in a 240 square foot FEMA trailer.

Ms. Lewis has asked repeatedly to be allowed to return to her apartment to clean and fix it up so she can move back in. She even offered to do all the work herself and with friends at no cost. The government continually refused to allow her to return. Now she is being evicted from her trailer and fears she will become homeless because there is no place for working people, especially African American working and poor people, to live in New Orleans.

Ms. Lewis is a strong woman who has worked her whole life. But the stress of being locked out of her apartment, living in a FEMA trailer and the possibility of being homeless brought out the tears. Thousands of other mothers and grandmothers are in the same situation.

Renting is so hard in part because there is a noose closing around the housing opportunities of New Orleans African American renters displaced by Katrina. They have been openly and directly targeted by public and private actions designed to keep them away. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) just added their weight to the attack by approving the demolition of 2966 apartments in New Orleans.

Despite telling a federal judge for the last year and a half that approvals of public housing demolition applications take about 100 working days to evaluate, HUD approved the plan to demolish nearly 3000 apartments one day after the complete application was filed. HUD says the 3000 apartments are scheduled to be replaced in a few years with up to 744 public housing eligible apartments and a few hundred subsidized apartments.

Unfortunately, HUD's actions are consistent with other governmental attacks on African American renters.



After Katrina, St. Bernard Parish, a 93% white adjoining suburb, enacted a law prohibiting home owners from renting their property to anyone who is not a blood relative. Jefferson Parish, another majority white adjoining suburb, unanimously passed an ordinance prohibiting the construction of any subsidized housing. The sponsoring legislator condemned poor people as "lazy," "ignorant" and "leeches on society" - specifically hoping to guard against former residents of New Orleans public housing. Across Lake Ponchartrain from New Orleans, the chief law enforcement officer of St. Tammany Parish, Sheriff Jack Strain, complained openly about the post-Katrina presence of "thugs and trash from New Orleans" and announced that people with dreadlocks or "chee wee hairstyles" could "expect to be getting a visit from a sheriff's deputy."

HUD's actions are also bolstered by pervasive racial discrimination in the private market as well. The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center has documented widespread racial discrimination in the metro New Orleans rental market and in the states surrounding the gulf coast.

HUD told a federal judge a few days "the average time [for the process of reviewing applications for demolition] is 100 days." They did suggest that the process could be expedited in the case of New Orleans. So it was. Instead of reviewing the details of demolishing 3000 apartments and considering the law and facts and the administrative record for 100 days, HUD expedited the process to one day.

HUD and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO, which HUD has been running for years) argued passionately that residents displaced from public housing (referred to once in their argument as 'refugees') are financially "better off" than they were before. This echoes the Barbara Bush comment of September 5, 2005 when she said, viewing the overwhelmingly African American crowd of thousands of people living on cots in the Astrodome, "And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this - (she chuckles slightly) this is working very well for them."

HUD announced approval of demolition of 2966 units of public housing in New Orleans - 896 apartments at Lafitte, 521 at C.J. Peete, 1158 at B.W. Cooper, and 1391 at St. Bernard. A few buildings on each site will be retained for historical preservation purposes.

New Orleans had a severe affordable housing crisis before Katrina when HANO housed over 5000 families. There was a waiting list of 8000 families trying to get in. HUD and HANO together did such a poor job of administering the agency that there were about 2000 more empty apartments that had been scheduled for major repairs for years.

The continuing deceptions by HUD and HANO have been shameless. Since Katrina, HUD has continued to act out both sides of a charade that the local housing authority is making decisions and HUD is waiting on local actions. Yet, the decision to demolish was announced by the Secretary of HUD in DC over a year ago. But in the year since then, HUD has continued to tell a federal judge that any legal challenge to demolitions was premature because HANO had not even submitted an application to HUD for their careful 100 day evaluation. This is while a HUD employee runs the agency, commuting back and forth to DC each week. HANO even announced they would have 2000 apartments ready for people in August of 2006 - a deadline not met even in September 2007. HANO later announced to the public that they had a list of 250 apartments ready for people to return only to admit in writing weeks later that no such list existed - nor were the phantom apartments ready.

The list of untruths goes on.

HUD would not agree to delay the demolition of the 3000 apartments until Congress finished reviewing legislation that would give residents the right to return and participate in the process of determining what kind of affordable housing should be in place in New Orleans.

And so HUD's actions help further restrict the opportunities for African American renters in New Orleans. Adjoining white suburbs do not want African American renters back. HUD does not want them back. The local federal judge has refused to stop the demolitions.

But the mothers and grandmothers and their families and friends are still determined to return and resist demolition. One sign at a recent public housing rally summed it up. "We will not allow the community we built to be rebuilt without us."

Odessa Lewis, despite her tears, said she is not giving up. She and other public housing residents promise "we did not come this far to be turned back now. We will do whatever is necessary to protect our homes." Thousands of African American mothers and grandmothers are the ones directly targeted by HUD's actions.

Forty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., said "We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society ... When profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." We can add sexism to the list, particularly in the fight for the right of public housing residents to return.

The fight of Ms. Lewis and others on the gulf coast shows how much we need a radical revolution of values.

## **Resources Scarce, Homelessness Persists in New Orleans**

**New York Times**

**May 28, 2008**

**by Shaila Dewan**

NEW ORLEANS — Mayor C. Ray Nagin recently suggested a way to reduce this city's post-Katrina homeless population: give them one-way bus tickets out of town.

Mr. Nagin later insisted the off-the-cuff proposal was just a joke. But he has portrayed the dozens of people camped in a tent city under a freeway overpass near Canal Street as recalcitrant drug and alcohol abusers who refuse shelter, give passers-by the finger and, worst of all, hail from somewhere else.

While many of the homeless do have addiction problems or mental illness, a survey by advocacy groups in February showed that 86 percent were from the New Orleans area. Sixty percent said they were homeless because of Hurricane Katrina, and about 30 percent said they had received rental assistance at one time from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Not far from the French Quarter, flanking Canal Street on Claiborne Avenue, they are living inside a long corridor formed not of walls and a roof but of the thick stench of human waste and sweat tinged with alcohol, crack and desperation.

The inhabitants are natives like Ronald Gardner, 54, an H.I.V.-positive man who said he had never before slept on the streets until Katrina. Or Ronald Berry, 57, who despite being a paranoid schizophrenic said he had lived on his own, in a rented house in the Lower Ninth Ward, for a dozen years before the storm. Both men receive disability checks of \$637 a month, not nearly enough to cover post-hurricane rents.

"If I could just get a warm room," Mr. Gardner said, sitting on the cot under which all his belongings are stored, "I could take it from there."

Lurlene Newell, 54, said the Federal Emergency Management Agency had paid her rent in Texas after the storm, but when she moved back to New Orleans, she could not find a place to live.

By one very rough estimate, the number of homeless people in New Orleans has doubled since Katrina struck in 2005. Homelessness has also become a much more visible problem – late last year, Unity of Greater New Orleans, a network of agencies that help the homeless, cleared an encampment of 300 people that had sprung up in Duncan Plaza, in full view of City Hall. About 280 of those people are now in apartments, but others have flocked to fill several blocks of Claiborne Avenue at Canal, near enough to the French Quarter to regularly encounter tourists.

Unity workers are hoping that Congress will include \$76 million in the supplemental appropriation for Iraq to pay for vouchers that would give rent subsidies and services to 3,000 disabled homeless people.

On Thursday, the Senate passed a version of the bill that included the vouchers; the current House version, not yet approved, does not include them. Without the vouchers, said Martha J. Kegel, Unity's executive director, even those people already in apartments will be in jeopardy. Their current vouchers, issued under a "rapid rehousing" program, expire at the end of 2008.

New Orleans had 2,800 beds for the homeless before the storm; now it has 2,000, Ms. Kegel said. Those beds are full, but even if they were not, many of the people living on Canal Street are not the sort who can stay in a group shelter. According to the survey, which was conducted before dawn one morning so that only those who actually sleep in the camp would be counted, 80 percent have at least one physical disability, 58 percent have had some

kind of addiction, 40 percent are mentally ill, and 19 percent were "tri-morbid" – they had a disability, an addiction and mental illness.

For these difficult cases, permanent housing with supportive services, like counseling, has become a preferred method. But it takes time, patience, money and one thing New Orleans is short of: apartments. Many apartment developers who applied for tax credits after Hurricane Katrina were required to set aside 5 percent of their units for supportive housing, but because of high construction costs and other factors, far fewer units than expected are in the pipeline. And without the vouchers, even those units will not be affordable.

Unity has already moved 60 of the most vulnerable people from the camp to hotel rooms, paid for with a city health department grant, including a woman who is eight months pregnant and a paranoid schizophrenic who is diabetic and a double amputee. In the filth of the camp, the amputee's stumps had become infected.

Outreach workers have found clients with cancer and colostomy bags, and one so disabled that he was unable to talk. On average, people have stayed in hotels for six weeks before Unity finds an apartment and cobbles together the necessary funds.

Mike Miller, the director of supportive housing placement at Unity, said the camp had become a public health hazard since the city removed some portable toilets in February.

"Two outreach workers have tested positive for tuberculosis," Mr. Miller said. "There's hepatitis C, there's AIDS, there's H.I.V. Everyone out there's had an eye infection of some sort. I got one."

On Thursday, Herman Moore Jr. was hanging out with a friend in the camp. Mr. Moore had lived in a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer, then a FEMA-financed hotel room, but had not realized that he was eligible for further assistance after the

30-day hotel stay ended last fall. Tipped off by his brother, Mr. Moore had only recently rented a house under the emergency management agency's program, but had yet to pay the deposit or turn on the utilities because he had no money.

"If I had a TV and some electricity, you all wouldn't even see me," he said.

Clara Gomez, 45, told an outreach worker that she had just discovered she was pregnant. Like about 14 percent of the homeless people under the bridge, Ms. Gomez had come to New Orleans to work as a builder, but acknowledged that she had problems with drug and alcohol abuse.

After getting fired from one job, she wound up under the bridge, where she met Patrick Pugh, 36, a New Orleanian who said he had been in drug rehabilitation, turning his life around, when the storm hit. Their IDs had been stolen, they said, making it difficult to get jobs or food stamps.

Seated on a mattress, Ms. Gomez shifted nervously, changing positions every few seconds, all the while keeping her arms anchored around Mr. Pugh's neck.

"We're ready," she said. "We're ready to get out of here."

## **Section 3**

### **Government Abandonment**

#### **Response under the Bush Administration**

President Bush signed a \$10.5 billion relief package within four days of the hurricane, within 1-2 days of the hurricane, National Guard troops arrived with relief of food, water, and medicine, and participated in security and rescue operations. Members of the United States Congress and others charged that the relief efforts were slow because most of the affected areas were poor. There was also concern that many National Guard units were short staffed in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama because they were currently on a tour of duty in Iraq.

Due to the slow response by the federal government to the hurricane, New Orleans' top emergency management official called the effort a, "national disgrace," and questioned when reinforcements would actually reach the increasingly desperate city. New Orleans' emergency operations chief Terry Ebbert blamed the inadequate response on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). "This is not a FEMA operation. I haven't seen a single FEMA guy", he said. "FEMA has been here three days, yet there is no command and control. We can send massive amounts of aid to tsunami victims, but we can't bail out the city of New Orleans."

Many police, fire and EMS organizations from outside the affected areas were reportedly stymied in their efforts to send help and assistance to the area. A report by the Appleseed Foundation, a public policy network, found that local entities (nonprofit and local government agencies) were far more flexible and responsive than the federal government.

Senator Mary Landrieu complained in a statement: "[T]he U.S. Forest Service had water-tanker aircraft available to help douse the fires raging on our riverfront, but FEMA has yet to accept the aid. When Amtrak offered trains to evacuate significant numbers of victims -- far more efficiently than buses -- FEMA again dragged its feet. Offers of medicine, communications equipment and other desperately needed items continue to flow in, only to be ignored by the agency ..."

Vice President Dick Cheney was also criticized in his role in the aftermath. On the night of August 30, and again the next morning, he personally called the manager of the Southern Pines Electric Power Association and ordered him to divert power crews to electrical substations in nearby Collins, Mississippi that were essential to the operation of the Colonial Pipeline, which carries gasoline and diesel fuel from Texas to the Northeast. The power crews were reportedly upset when told what the purpose of the redirection was, since they were in the process of restoring power to two local hospitals, but did so anyway.

During the MSNBC interview, Broussard noted that Walmart was prepared to deliver three trucks of water to the affected area, but FEMA turned them back and said it wasn't needed. Moreover, FEMA ordered that their emergency communication be cut.

These are just a few of the examples of refusal of much needed assistance the president and his administration committed.

In years before the storm Bush demonstrated inexcusable negligence and violated the public trust by cutting the budget for hurricane defense, though the high probability of the breaching of the levees and the enormous risk to human life from a major hurricane hitting New Orleans were predicted and well known for years before the hurricane hit

From 2001 through 2005, the Bush administration battled with Congress to cut a total of approximately 67% from the budgetary requests from the Army Corps of Engineers for levee augmentation projects in the New Orleans area, but ultimately settled with Congress on a 50% cut in these budgetary requests. Hurricane Katrina exposed grave flaws in the national emergency response system and criticisms of the Bush administration's response quickly ensued, calling the federal government's handling of the situation "a failure of leadership."<sup>20</sup>

FEMA's post-Katrina housing response was criticized for being sluggish, insufficient, and inefficient- guided by continually changing requirements and deadlines. Originally, FEMA relied solely on trailers as housing assistance, which proved costly and failed to satisfy need. Immediately after the storm, New Orleans was in need of 69,706 trailers, but only 31,517 were recorded ever to be occupied.<sup>21</sup> The Department of Homeland Security of Inspector General stated that FEMA was inefficient in identifying qualifying applicants and adequate locations for trailers.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, therefore, found refuge in overcrowded cruise ships, apartments,<sup>23</sup> hotels, motels, and makeshift shelters outdoors and along highways.<sup>24</sup>

Of the aid distributed, much was directed towards homeowners, particularly under repair and replacement programs. Rental repair programs were denied on the grounds that it was not allowable under the Stafford Act and direct rental assistance through FEMA was limited to about \$26,000.<sup>25</sup> 80% of the trailers that were distributed, for thousands of trailers were never used, were crammed on private property. Additionally, FEMA initially failed to warn trailers' inhabitants of dangerously high levels of formaldehyde existing in this type of manufactured housing.<sup>26</sup> By mid-2007, FEMA began setting deadlines for trailer evacuation and warning of trailer park closings, although the FEMA Deputy Administrator Admiral admitted that FEMA had no eviction policy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/02/13/katrina.congress/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.throughtheeyeofthestorm.com/KatrinaFacts.htm>

<sup>22</sup> <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/ files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/ files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/31/national/nationalspecial/31stranded.html>

<sup>25</sup> <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/ files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/ files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/ files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf>



The extent of aid distributed through HUD was limited to three programs: The Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program (KDHAP), The Disaster Voucher Program (DVP), and The Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP). KDHAP and DVP would aid only pre-Katrina HUD clients, mostly those who had lived in public housing. DHAP, instated in December, 2007, would serve the 45,000 households not assisted through the other two rental assistance programs.<sup>28</sup> These were only temporary forms of aid, however. KDHAP was terminated and replaced with the DVP on January 31, 2006.<sup>29</sup> DVP aid was originally scheduled to terminate on September 30, 2007, but was extended until June 30, 2008,<sup>30</sup> then to February 28, 2009, and finally to at least December 31, 2009.<sup>31</sup> The failure to provide long-term housing assistance was one of the most prominent inefficiencies of the Bush administration.

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<sup>28</sup> [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/\\_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.nmhc.org/Content/ServeContent.cfm?ContentItemID=3635>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.allbusiness.com/government/government-procedure-lawmaking-appropriations/8905716-1.html>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/publications/notices/09/pih2009-8.pdf>

## PRESS AND MEDIA

### Some GOP Legislators Hit Jarring Notes in Addressing Katrina

Washington Post  
September 10, 2005  
by Charles Babington

Some lawmakers are still struggling to find the sympathetic but diligent tone that a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina -- and the lagging government response to its victims -- would seem to call for.

The latest elected official to step into the swamp was Rep. Richard H. Baker, a 10-term Republican from Baton Rouge. The Wall Street Journal reported yesterday that he was overheard telling lobbyists: **"We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."**

Democrats, of course, gleefully disseminated the report, saying they detected a GOP pattern. House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) recently spoke of bulldozing part of New Orleans, they reminded everyone, and Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) suggested punishing people who had ignored pre-storm evacuation orders.

Baker issued a lengthy statement saying he was "taken aback" by the Journal's brief item. "What I remember expressing, in a private conversation with a housing advocate and member of my staff, was that 'We have been trying for decades to clean up New Orleans public housing to provide decent housing for residents, and now it looks like God is finally making us do it,' " Baker wrote. "Obviously I have never expressed anything but the deepest concern about the suffering that this terrible catastrophe has caused for so many in our state."

Meanwhile, in Pennsylvania, Santorum was drawing a second round of fire, this time for saying the National Weather Service's forecasts and warnings about Katrina's path were "not sufficient." Democrats e-mailed audio links to a radio interview in which Santorum said that "we need a robust National Weather Service" that focuses on severe weather predictions. "Obviously the consequences are incredibly severe, as we've seen here in the last couple of weeks, if we don't get it right and don't properly prepare," Santorum said.

In fact, many people think the Weather Service got the Katrina prediction exactly right. They include GOP Sen. Jim DeMint (S.C.), who chairs the Senate Commerce subcommittee on disaster

prediction and prevention. He issued a statement headlined "DeMint Gives National Weather Service 'A' Grade for Katrina Prediction."

Santorum, long at odds with the federal agency, is pushing a bill that would require it to surrender some of its duties to private businesses, some of them located in his state. The National Weather Service Employees Organization said in a statement: "We did our job well and everyone knows it. By falsely claiming that we got it wrong, Rick Santorum is continuing his misguided crusade against the National Weather Service."

Santorum's office issued a statement yesterday repeating the concern that "there are serious consequences" when the Weather Service falls short of "getting it right."

These days it seems that no Republican remark is too small or ambiguous to trigger a Democratic mass mailing. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee yesterday sent links to a Houston Chronicle blogger who had watched House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Tex.) tour the Astrodome, where children evacuated from New Orleans were playing. The blog reported that DeLay "likened their stay to being at camp and asked, 'Now, tell me the truth, boys, is this kind of fun?' " The blogger said the youngsters "nodded yes, but looked perplexed."

## **Lessons from Katrina: How to Destroy an African American City in 33 Steps**

CommonDreams.org

June 28, 2007

by **BILL QUIGLEY**

**Step One.** Delay. If there is one word that sums up the way to destroy an African-American city after a disaster, that word is DELAY. If you are in doubt about any of the following steps--just remember to delay and you will probably be doing the right thing.

**Step Two.** When a disaster is coming, do not arrange a public evacuation. Rely only on individual resources. People with cars and money for hotels will leave. The elderly, the disabled and

the poor will not be able to leave. Most of those without cars--25% of households of New Orleans, overwhelmingly African-Americans--will not be able to leave. Most of the working poor, overwhelmingly African-American, will not be able to leave. Many will then permanently accuse the victims who were left behind of creating their own human disaster because of their own poor planning. It is critical to start by having people blame the victims for their own problems.

**Step Three.** When the disaster hits make certain the national response is overseen by someone who has no experience at all handling anything on a large scale, particularly disasters. In fact, you can even inject some humor into the response--have the disaster coordinator be someone whose last job was the head of a dancing horse association.

**Step Four.** Make sure that the President and national leaders remain aloof and only slightly concerned. This sends an important message to the rest of the country.

**Step Five.** Make certain the local, state, and national governments do not respond in a coordinated effective way. This will create more chaos on the ground.

**Step Six.** Do not bring in food or water or communications right away. This will make everyone left behind more frantic and create incredible scenes for the media.

**Step Seven.** Make certain that the media focus of the disaster is not on the heroic community work of thousands of women, men and young people helping the elderly, the sick and the trapped survive, but mainly on acts of people looting. Also spread and repeat the rumors that people trapped on rooftops are shooting guns not to attract attention and get help, but AT the helicopters. This will reinforce the message that "those people" left behind are different from the rest of us and are beyond help.

**Step Eight.** Refuse help from other countries. If we accept help, it looks like we cannot or choose not to handle this problem ourselves. This cannot be the message. The message we want to put out over and over is that we have plenty of resources and there is plenty of help. Then if people are not receiving help, it is their own fault. This should be done quietly.

**Step Nine.** Once the evacuation of those left behind actually starts, make sure people do not know where they are going or have any way to know where the rest of their family has gone. In fact, make sure that African-Americans end up much farther away from home than others.

**Step Ten.** Make sure that when government assistance finally has to be given out, it is given out in a totally arbitrary way. People will have lost their homes, jobs, churches, doctors, schools, neighbors and friends. Give them a little bit of money, but not too much. Make people dependent. Then cut off the money.

Then give it to some and not others. Refuse to assist more than one person in every household. This will create conflicts where more than one generation lived together. Make it impossible for people to get consistent answers to their questions. Long lines and busy phones will discourage people from looking for help.

**Step Eleven.** Insist the President suspend federal laws requiring living wages and affirmative action for contractors working on the disaster. While local workers are still displaced, import white workers from outside the city for the high-paying jobs like crane operators and bulldozers. Import Latino workers from outside the city for the low-paying dangerous jobs. Make sure to have elected officials, black and white, blame job problems on the lowest wage immigrant workers. This will create divisions between black and brown workers that can be exploited by those at the top. Because many of the brown workers do not have legal papers, those at the top will not have to worry about paying decent wages, providing health insurance, following safety laws, unemployment compensation, workers compensation, or union organizing. They become essentially disposable workers--use them, then lose them.

**Step Twelve.** Whatever you do, keep people away from their city for as long as possible. This is the key to long-term success in destroying the African-American city. Do not permit people to come home. Keep people guessing about what is going to happen and when it is going to happen. Set numerous deadlines and then break

them. This will discourage people and make it increasingly difficult for people to return.

**Step Thirteen.** When you finally have to reopen the city, make sure to reopen the African-American sections last. This will aggravate racial tensions in the city and create conflicts between those who are able to make it home and those who are not.

**Step Fourteen.** When the big money is given out, make sure it is all directed to homeowners and not to renters. This is particularly helpful in a town like New Orleans that was majority African-American and majority renter. Then, after you have excluded renters, mess the program for the homeowners up so that they must wait for years to get money to fix their homes.

**Step Fifteen.** Close down all the public schools for months. This will prevent families in the public school system, overwhelmingly African-Americans, from coming home.

**Step Sixteen.** Fire all the public school teachers, teacher aides, cafeteria workers and bus drivers and de-certify the teachers union--the largest in the state. This will primarily hurt middle class African Americans and make them look for jobs elsewhere.

**Step Seventeen.** Even better, take this opportunity to flip the public school system into a charter system and push foundations and the government to extra money to the new charter schools. Give the schools with the best test scores away first. Then give

the least flooded schools away next. Turn 70% of schools into charters so that the kids with good test scores or solid parental involvement will go to the charters. That way the kids with average scores, or learning disabilities, or single parent families who are still displaced are kept segregated away from the "good" kids. You will have to set up a few schools for those other kids, but make sure those schools do not get any extra money, do not have libraries, nor doors on the toilets, nor enough teachers. In fact, because of this, you better make certain there are more security guards than teachers.

**Step Eighteen.** Let the market do what it does best. When rent goes up 70%, say there is nothing we can do about it. This will have two great results. It will keep many former residents away from the city and it will make landlords happy. If wages go up, immediately import more outside workers and wages will settle down.

**Step Nineteen.** Make sure all the predominately white suburbs surrounding the African-American city make it very difficult for the people displaced from the city to return to the metro area. Have one suburb refuse to allow any new subsidized housing at all. Have the Sheriff of another threaten to stop and investigate anyone wearing dreadlocks. Throw in a little humor and have one nearly all-white suburb pass a law which makes it illegal for homeowners to rent to people other than their blood relatives!



The courts may strike these down, but it will take time and the message will be clear--do not think about returning to the suburbs.

**Step Twenty.** Reduce public transportation by more than 80%. The people without cars will understand the message.

**Step Twenty One.** Keep affordable housing to a minimum. Use money instead to reopen the Superdome and create tourism campaigns. Refuse to boldly create massive homeownership opportunities for former renters. Delay re-opening apartment complexes in African American neighborhoods. As long as less than half the renters can return to affordable housing, they will not return.

**Step Twenty Two.** Keep all public housing closed. Since it is 100% African-American, this is a no-brainer. Make sure to have African-Americans be the people who deliver the message. This step will also help by putting more pressure on the rental market as 5000 more families will then have to compete for rental housing with low-income workers. This will provide another opportunity for hundreds of millions of government funds to be funneled to corporations when these buildings are torn down and developers can build up other less-secure buildings in their place. Make sure to tell the 5000 families evicted from public housing that you are not letting them back for their own good. Tell them you are trying to save them from living in a segregated neighborhood. This will also send a good signal--if the

government can refuse to allow people back, private concerns are free to do the same or worse.

**Step Twenty Three.** Shut down as much public health as possible. Sick and elderly people and moms with little kids need access to public healthcare. Keep the public hospital, which hosted about 350,000 visits a year before the disaster, closed. Keep the neighborhood clinics closed. Put all the pressure on the private healthcare facilities and provoke economic and racial tensions there between the insured and uninsured.

**Step Twenty Four.** Close as many public mental healthcare providers as possible. The trauma of the disaster will seriously increase stress on everyone. Left untreated, medical experts tell us this will dramatically increase domestic violence, self-medication and drug and alcohol abuse, and of course crime.

**Step Twenty Five.** Keep the city environment unfriendly to women. Women were already widely discriminated against before the storm. Make sure that you do not reopen day care centers. This, combined with the lack of healthcare, lack of affordable housing, and lack of transportation, will keep moms with kids away. If you can keep women with kids away, the city will destroy itself.

**Step Twenty Six.** Create and maintain an environment where black on black crime will flourish. As long as you can keep parents out of town, keep the schools hostile to kids without parents, keep public healthcare closed, make only low-paying jobs available,

not fund social workers or prosecutors or public defenders or police, and keep chaos the norm, young black men will certainly kill other young black men. To increase the visibility of the crime problem, bring in the National Guard in fatigues to patrol the streets in their camouflage hummers.

**Step Twenty Seven.** Strip the local elected predominately African American government of its powers. Make certain the money that is coming in to fix up the region is not under their control. Privatize as much as you can as quickly as you can--housing, healthcare, and education for starters. When in doubt, privatize. Create an appointed commission of people who have no experience in government to make all the decisions. In fact, it is better to create several such commissions, that way no one will really be sure who is in charge and there will be much more delay and conflict. Treat the local people like they are stupid, you know what is best for them much better than they do.

**Step Twenty Eight.** Create lots of planning processes but give them no authority. Overlap them where possible. Give people conflicting signals whether their neighborhood will be allowed to rebuild or be turned into green space. This will create confusion, conflict and aggravation. People will blame the officials closest to them--the local African-American officials, even though they do not have any authority to do anything about these plans since they do not control the rebuilding money.

**Step Twenty Nine.** Hold an election but make it very difficult for displaced voters to participate. In fact, do not allow any voting in any place outside the state even we do it for other countries and even though hundreds of thousands of people are still displaced. This is very important because when people are not able to vote, those who have been able to return can say "Well, they didn't even vote, so I guess they are not interested in returning."

**Step Thirty.** Get the elected officials out of the way and make room for corporations to make a profit. There are billions to be made in this process for well-connected national and international corporations. There is so much chaos that no one will be able to figure out exactly where the money went for a long time. There is no real attempt to make sure that local businesses, especially African-American businesses, get contracts--at best they get modest subcontracts from the corporations which got the big money. Make sure the authorities prosecute a couple of little people who ripped off \$2000--that will temporarily satisfy people who know they are being ripped off and divert attention from the big money rip-offs. This will also provide another opportunity to blame the victims--as critics can say "Well, we gave them lots of money, they must have wasted it, how much more can they expect from us?"

**Step Thirty One.** Keep people's attention diverted from the African-American city. Pour money into Iraq instead of the Gulf

Coast. Corporations have figured out how to make big bucks whether we are winning or losing the war. It is easier to convince the country to support war--support for cities is much, much tougher. When the war goes badly, you can change the focus of the message to supporting the troops. Everyone loves the troops. No one can say we all love African-Americans. Focus on terrorists--that always seems to work.

**Step Thirty Two.** Refuse to talk about or look seriously at race. Condemn anyone who dares to challenge the racism of what is going on--accuse them of "playing the race card" or say they are paranoid. Criticize people who challenge the exclusion of African-Americans as people who "just want to go back to the bad old days." Repeat the message that you want something better for everyone. Use African American spokespersons where possible.

**Step Thirty-Three.** Repeat these steps.

Note to readers. Every fact in this list actually happened and continues to happen in New Orleans after Katrina.

## **LEAVING THE TRAILERS**

### **Ready or Not, Katrina Victims Lose Temporary Housing**

**New York Times**

**May 8, 2009**

**By Shaila Dewan**

NEW ORLEANS — Earnest Hammond, a retired truck driver, did not get any of the money that went to aid property owners after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

He failed to qualify for one federal program and was told he missed the deadline on another. But he did get a trailer to live in while he carries out his own recovery plan: collecting cans in a pushcart to pay for the renovations to his storm-damaged apartment, storing them by the roomful in the gutted building he owns.

It is a slow yet steady process. Before the price of aluminum fell to 30 cents a pound, from 85 cents, he had accumulated more than \$10,000, he said, almost enough to pay the electrician. But despite such progress, last Friday a worker from the Federal Emergency Management Agency delivered a letter informing him that it would soon repossess the trailer that is, for now, his only home.

"I need the trailer," said Mr. Hammond, 70. "I ain't got nowhere to go if they take the trailer."

Though more than 4,000 Louisiana homeowners have received rebuilding money only in the last six months, or are struggling with inadequate grants or no money at all, FEMA is intent on taking away their trailers by the end of May. The deadline, which ends temporary housing before permanent housing has replaced it, has become a stark example of recovery programs that seem almost to be working against one another.

Thousands of rental units have yet to be restored, and not a single one of 500 planned "Katrina cottages" has been completed and occupied. The Road Home program for single-family homeowners, which has cost federal taxpayers \$7.9 billion, has a new contractor who is struggling to review a host of appeals, and workers who assist the homeless are finding more elderly people squatting in abandoned buildings.

Nonetheless, FEMA wants its trailers back, even though it plans to scrap or sell them for a fraction of what it paid for them.

"All I can say is that this is a temporary program, it was always intended as a temporary program, and at a certain point all temporary programs must end," said Brent Colburn, the agency's director of external affairs. He said there would be no extensions.

As of last week, there were two groups still in the agency's temporary housing program: more than 3,000 in trailers and nearly 80 who have been in hotels paid for by FEMA since last May, when it shut down group trailer sites. Most are elderly, disabled or both, including double amputees, diabetes patients, the mentally ill, people prone to seizures and others dependent on oxygen tanks.

Of those in trailers, more than 2,000 are homeowners who fear that the progress they are making in rebuilding will come to a halt if their trailers are taken.

"They had helped me out up until this point, and I couldn't believe that they suddenly decided, no, we're not going to let you finish the house, we're just going to take the trailer, and you can sit here on an empty lot," said Philipp Seelig, 70, a retired handyman. He said he was about two months from being able to move back into his duplex in the Broadmoor neighborhood. A grant to elevate his house to the required height did not come until December.

Progress on renovations has been slow for many reasons: contractors who did shoddy work or simply absconded with money, baffling red tape and rule changes, and inadequate grants. The opening of new rental units began to accelerate this year, but many projects have been stymied by the recession.

FEMA says it has done everything it can to help those in temporary housing. But, as is so often the case when it comes to Katrina issues, the agency's clients give a different account. Agency officials insist, for example, that they have been working "extensively" to help families in trailers and hotels find permanent solutions.

"A lot of people are involved in the process of making sure that no one falls through the cracks," said Manuel Broussard, an agency spokesman in Louisiana. "Everyone's been offered housing up to this point several times. And for various reasons, they have not accepted it."

But the dozen temporary housing occupants interviewed for this story said they had received little if any attention from FEMA workers and were lucky to get a list of landlords, much less an offer of permanent housing.

In Baton Rouge, Troy Porter, 47, had been staying in virtual isolation at a \$100-a-night Courtyard Inn by Marriott since last June. There, his normally manageable depression deepened until, he said, he would go for weeks without leaving his room.

"The only time I've seen FEMA workers was in the last couple of weeks, where they come and give you the paper saying this month is your last month," Mr. Porter said. "They handed you the paper, and they turned around and walked off."

Mr. Porter perked up last week when he was visited by Sister Judith Brun, who has been working with Katrina evacuees. In her view, the type of case management endorsed by FEMA — which primarily involves handing someone a list of phone numbers for



other overtaxed agencies and, according to numerous Katrina victims, declining to return phone calls – lacks the type of personal engagement that someone like Mr. Porter needs to become self-sufficient.

“Because nobody comes in at a personal level to help him recover,” Sister Judith said, “it costs us tons of money.”

Last year, the Louisiana Recovery Authority was supposed to unveil a more intensive caseworker system for people in temporary housing, but it never materialized. The authority has now asked homeless service organizations like Unity of Greater New Orleans and the Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless in Baton Rouge to help find stable housing for the hotel occupants.

FEMA officials also say that residents can buy their trailers, sometimes for as little as \$300. But virtually all of the residents interviewed said they had offered to do so and been told they could not.

Residents said FEMA workers had started visiting them in the past two months, advising them not to move out and saying extensions would be available to those who showed hardship or progress in rebuilding. But agency officials said that was not the case.

Jane Batty, Mr. Seelig’s longtime tenant, who has her own trailer next to his, was not surprised. “There is only one way to categorize this kind of behavior: it’s crazy making,” she said. “They’ve always had a different answer or had a different ploy to get us out of trailers that we had already agreed to buy.”

## Section 4:

### Hopeful New Beginning? Response under the Obama Administration

In his speech on Hurricane Katrina and Gulf Coast rebuilding on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 during his campaign for presidency, president Obama openly criticized the Bush Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, saying,

America's government failed its citizens... we can talk about... levees that couldn't hold, about a FEMA that seemed, not just incompetent, but paralyzed and powerless, about a president who only saw the people from the window of an airplane instead of down here on the ground trying to provide comfort and aid.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, as senator, Obama recognized the need for affordable housing in New Orleans and foresaw that the demolition of public housing would only exacerbate the city's affordability crisis. In 2008, Obama went on record as supporting a moratorium on the demolition of public housing and even sent a letter to President Bush calling for a halt to demolitions on December 18, 2007. As president, Obama has effectively extended aid in the form of vouchers to Katrina victims, but has failed to address the public housing situation.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, the trailer program was officially ended by FEMA. 3,450 families are still housed in trailers, many in New Orleans.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing that thousands would be forcibly evicted, President Obama and HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan agreed that a "transition period" was needed. On February 10, 2009, the Obama administration announced that it would allow families living in trailers to buy their unit for \$5 or less.

Additionally, \$50 million would be distributed in the form of permanent rental assistance vouchers to trailer occupants in order to facilitate their transition into permanent housing, as well as to households previously under the DHAP. Renters who received vouchers under DHAP would qualify for permanent vouchers if their incomes fell below the income limit of the Section 8 Voucher program. In this manner, a 4-person family earning \$29,900 would qualify for assistance. Under the Bush Administration, such a family would qualify for vouchers only if it earned up to \$17,950.<sup>34</sup> According to Secretary Donovan,

The Bush administration had made a decision to provide vouchers only to vulnerable families -- elderly, disabled and extremely low-income. There's a whole group of other families that are eligible for the permanent voucher

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laHW0sF1nmM>

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/04trailers.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/04trailers.html?_r=1)

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/fema\\_rent\\_subsidy\\_program\\_for.html](http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/fema_rent_subsidy_program_for.html)

program that they were not planning to cover. I made a decision to make vouchers available to every eligible family.<sup>35</sup>

Despite his support for the preservation of public housing as candidate for presidency and of a moratorium on the demolition of the “Big Four,” President Obama’s actions regarding public housing do not substantially deviate from those of Bush. It remains one that emphasizes privatization of important social goods such as affordable housing.

The Obama administration, for instance, has continued to move forward with the demolitions of public housing.<sup>36</sup> In May, 2009, the Laffite complex was closed, despite protests, letters, and meetings by residents, supporters, and the grassroots organization May Day New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> By April 1<sup>st</sup> all residents had been evicted and a metal fence was placed around the complex.<sup>38</sup> More than 3,000 units of public housing have already been demolished in the fourth planning district, where Lafitte is located.<sup>39</sup> The Obama Administration’s continuation of public housing demolitions demonstrates an inadequate handling of the need for affordable housing and largely ignores the affordability crisis New Orleans already faces.

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<sup>35</sup> [http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/fema\\_rent\\_subsidy\\_program\\_for.html](http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/fema_rent_subsidy_program_for.html)

<sup>36</sup> <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/04/13880.php>

<sup>37</sup> <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/05/13908.php>

<sup>38</sup> <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/04/13880.php>

<sup>39</sup> <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/05/13908.php>

## PRESS AND MEDIA

### Letter from Barack Obama as senator urging President Bush to stop demolitions in New Orleans<sup>40</sup>

Dear Mr. President:

I urge you to abandon all plans to demolish federally-assisted housing in New Orleans, Louisiana until there is a comprehensive plan to meet the region's extensive affordable housing needs.

Two years ago, when you appeared in Jackson Square, you spoke of America's "duty to confront this poverty with bold action." You explained: "Americans want the Gulf Coast not just to survive, but to thrive; not just to cope, but to overcome. We want evacuees to come home, for the best of reasons – because they have a real chance at a better life in a place they love."

Unfortunately, there are an estimated 12,000 people already homeless in New Orleans, and thousands more are struggling with costly and slow rebuilding efforts and private rents that have risen 45% since the storm. More than two-thirds of the housing stock was destroyed by the hurricane, and much of it has not yet been rebuilt. Thousands of residents are still living in trailers with dangerous levels of formaldehyde even though more than 800 days have passed since Hurricane Katrina made landfall.

Despite this harsh reality, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is now planning to reduce the limited supply of affordable housing even further by demolishing 4,500 units of public housing. Notwithstanding your wish for evacuees to come home to "thrive" and "overcome," New Orleans does not have adequate affordable housing options even for the people who are already there.

It is critical for policy makers to answer the following questions before any demolition takes place:

- Is demolition, which was originally planned and approved before hurricane Katrina, still a sensible strategy in light of the region's housing crisis?
- How many new units of public housing will be built or acquired to replace the 4,500 scheduled for demolition? If less than 4,500, what is the plan to close the gap to get back at

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<sup>40</sup> <http://thinkonthesethings.wordpress.com/2007/12/18/obama-calls-on-president-to-protect-affordable-housing-in-new-orleans/>

least to pre-Katrina levels? If more than 4,500, what plans are in place to ensure adequate income diversity and economic integration?

- What plans are in place to meet the low-income housing needs during the period between demolition and the availability of new housing?
- What supports are in place to assist residents during any housing transition?

Almost a year ago, I visited New Orleans and posed similar questions to HUD. I have yet to receive an adequate response to that inquiry.

There is no question that most displaced residents want to come back to their homes and apartments, but that is hardly possible if they return to a city with fewer affordable housing options available than it had before. I support the conversion to mixed income neighborhoods and greater economic integration, but such redevelopment plans must not be at the expense of adequate and improved housing options for the poor. No public housing should be demolished until HUD can point to an equivalent number of replacement units in the near vicinity.

Over the past two years, the federal government has failed the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. But there is still an opportunity to demonstrate that they are not forgotten. I urge you to reconsider the demolition of these housing units until there is a comprehensive plan to meet the region's extensive affordable housing needs. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Barack Obama  
United States Senator

## **Katrina Victims Will Not Have to Vacate Trailers**

**New York Times**

**June 4, 2009**

**By Shaila Dewan**

Hurricane Katrina victims around the Gulf Coast who were told to vacate their temporary trailers by the end of May will instead be allowed to buy them for \$5 or less, White House officials announced on Wednesday.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development will also give the 3,450 families still in trailers or temporary housing – including many elderly, poor and disabled people – priority for \$50 million in permanent housing vouchers. The money for the vouchers was appropriated by Congress last year.

Some of those living in trailers are destitute and have no other housing. Others, including many people in New Orleans, are living in trailers outside their damaged homes, while waiting to complete repairs that would allow them to move back. The May 31 deadline set off a panic among both kinds of residents and raised an outcry because so much of the housing destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has yet to be replaced.

Residents were overjoyed to hear that they would not be evicted. "Are you serious?" asked Belinda Jenkins, a disabled woman living in a trailer in front of her house in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans. "Oh, wow. That's a blessing."

Ms. Jenkins and her husband had stored their clothes and important papers in their car, out of fear that they would come home to find their trailer gone.

Obama administration officials also said they would allocate additional money for case managers to help people find permanent housing. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has twice offered money to the Louisiana Recovery Authority for that

purpose, but the program never materialized. This time, a senior administration official said, federal agencies will manage the program and hire experienced workers who will visit clients in person.

Advocates for Katrina evacuees were warily optimistic about the announcement, which Obama administration officials have characterized as an effort to fix a messy situation they inherited.

"It is a tremendous step in the right direction," said Laura Tuggle, a housing lawyer at Southwest Louisiana Legal Services. "This is kind of an acknowledgment that there may have been some missteps along the way."

Martha Kegel, the director of Unity of Greater New Orleans, a homeless service agency, said vouchers and case management were desperately needed, though she said she remained cautious.

"It's been such a long history of FEMA making announcements in the media," Ms. Kegel said, "and nothing much in the way of assistance has ever trickled down to the elderly and disabled people trying to repair their homes."

The administration official, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the subject, said trailer residents would be notified of the change in policy within a week. The official said families that had already left their trailers because they were afraid of eviction would be eligible for the vouchers if they met the income requirements.

And FEMA said no one would be forced out of a trailer. "No one will face evictions from a temporary unit while these new measures are implemented," said Clark Stevens, a spokesman for the emergency agency.

Because of the severity of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the complexity of rebuilding, the temporary housing program lasted far longer than anyone anticipated. At the beginning of May, FEMA

notified trailer residents that they had until the end of the month to vacate or legal action would be taken against them. An agency official said at the time that the trailers would be auctioned off or sold for scrap.

Almost two-thirds of those still in trailers are homeowners who are trying to complete their repairs. Many said they had been bilked by contractors or had received grants from the Road Home, a taxpayer-financed program to help rebuild houses, only in the last few months.

Susan Mangipano, a waitress living in Lacombe, La., said that after many false starts and a fight with her insurance company, renovations of her home were 75 percent complete. She had previously been told she could buy the trailer she was living in from FEMA for \$9,000, a price far out of her reach. Ms. Mangipano, who had put all her things in storage in case the trailer was removed, said she would probably buy the mobile home for the giveaway price, but worried that it would be expensive to move it when it was no longer needed.

Mobile homes will be sold by the government for \$5, and smaller "park model" travel trailers will go for \$1. The smallest travel trailers, which do not meet the government's definition of "manufactured housing," and any units whose formaldehyde levels exceed safety standards, will not be sold. Of the 3,446 trailers now in use, about 1,160 are eligible to be sold. Families living in trailers not for sale will be able to apply for one of several hundred trailers that the agency hopes to donate through nonprofit groups.

Ms. Mangipano said she had been told that she would have to buy insurance and dig a new septic tank to qualify for a donated trailer.

The housing vouchers will help those who were renters before the storm and who make less than 50 percent of the area's median income. The \$50 million is enough for about 6,800 families.



The trailers were only one part of FEMA's housing assistance program. Tens of thousands of other families moved into apartments that were paid for by the agency. There were also vouchers for the eligible among those families, but thousands have gone unused because of a bottleneck at the housing authorities that are supposed to be processing them. That program, which currently houses more than 16,000 families, was extended until Aug. 31.

## **Has Change Come to Post-Katrina New Orleans? Bush, Obama, and the First 100 Days**

**New Orleans Independent Media Center**

**April 25, 2009**

**by Jay Arena**

As people in the U.S. and around the world make their evaluation of President Barack Obama's first one-hundred days, many--that is, those that truly wanted a break from the racist, militarist, anti-working class policies of the Bush regime--are coming to the conclusion that the 'change' his campaign promised seems to have turned into 'more of the same'. An examination of his substantive policies, from the continued military occupation of Iraq and expanded wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the trillions more to bailout Wall Street while a promised health care plan is put on the back burner, to an unwillingness to prosecute criminals, from George Bush on down, that carried out torture, underscores the extent of continuity, rather than change, embodied by the administration of the United States' first African American president.

Yet, you might ask, does Obama's track record of continuity over substantive change extend to even still devastated New Orleans? Evaluating what is happening in New Orleans is a particularly significant measure of the new president since the city became so emblematic of everything that was wrong with the U.S. under Bush. In fact, even Bush's own aides, such as Scott McClellan, have acknowledged that Katrina and Bush's response was a key turning point in the administration's descent. Thus, evaluating what change--or lack thereof--the Obama administration has introduced to New Orleans provides an important window into the political character of the new regime in Washington. In fact the record shows, as I will elaborate, the gap between the rhetoric of change, and the continuity in practice, is maybe most glaring in post-Katrina New Orleans.

**Obama, Public Housing, and the Racist Disaster Capitalism Agenda**

The central thrust of the Bush administration's post-Katrina 'reconstruction' plan—and shared, to a great degree by state and local officials, Democrat and Republican, black and white, alike—has been to use the disaster as an opportunity to privatize and eliminate such vital public services as education, housing and health care. The dismantling of the public sector is central to what many call 'disaster capitalism' where corporations, and their public servants, use the disruption and disorientation produced by a disaster among the working class to grab and pillage public resources, award sweetheart contracts, and to lift labor, environmental or any other constraints on profit making.

The Obama administration has not deviated fundamentally from this agenda, with their stance toward public housing being a prime example. To understand the level of continuity we need to briefly review Bush's post-Katrina policy toward public housing in New Orleans. At the time of the storm New Orleans had about 7,000 public housing apartments, down by about half following the Clinton administration's so-called HOPE VI program that led to the elimination of wide swaths of the system, while rebuilding only a fraction of affordable units under the new 'mixed income' replacements. The sturdy, brick, three story apartment buildings that make up most of traditional Public Housing in New Orleans provided poor people, besides housing, a key source of hurricane protection. Yet, despite this role in still hurricane-vulnerable New Orleans, and despite coming through the storm in much better shape than most of the private housing stock, the federally controlled local housing authority--HANO--closed down four housing developments, the St Bernard, Lafitte, BW Cooper and CJ Peete, immediately after the storm. The Bush regime followed this--after an intense two year anti-racist, poor people fight back, that included scores of protests, building occupations, and the police tasing, macing, beating and arrest of people for having the temerity to speak out at the December 20, 2007 New Orleans City Council hearing--with the demolition of some 5,000 apartments in the Spring of 2008.

Demolition was a clear violation of international law, which requires the government to facilitate the return of the displaced--not demolish their homes. Of course, it is not a surprise that the Bush regime, which flouted international law and public opinion to carry out the war against Iraq, would break international treaties when dealing with its own citizens, especially poor African American families in New Orleans. Yet, despite a change in discourse, the new Obama administration stands in violation of international law as well, by continuing the demolition of public housing and thus preventing the return of poor, displaced, predominately black, people to the city. Of course, considering the makeup of the Obama administration, this stance should not come as a surprise either. Obama, as a State Senator and during his presidential campaign, defended 'public-

private partnerships', that involve providing public subsidies to private developers, as an alternative to public housing. Indeed some of his top advisors and supporters, such as Valerie Jarrett, the CEO of The Habitat Company, one of Chicago's largest real estate redevelopment firms, has made millions managing government-funded private replacements for public housing, such as the squalid Parc Grove apartments in Chicago. Jarrett self-servingly defended her role, arguing, 'Government is just not as good at owning and managing as the private sector because the incentives are not there' (see the Boston Globe exposé by Binyamin Applebaum, June 27, 2008).

### **Policing the Movement: Obama and His Non-Profit Partners**

Thus, unsurprisingly Obama, like Bush before him, has been pushing forward with more demolitions and replacement with 'public-private partnerships' that enrich private developers. His new Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Shaun Donovan, is well prepared for that role having been a HUD under secretary for the Clinton administration in the 1990s, overseeing the demolition of tens of thousands of public housing apartments, and displacement of poor families from highly valued inner city real estate, such as at New Orleans St. Thomas development. Most recently he worked as Billionaire New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Housing czar, overseeing the continued underfunding and undermining--the demolition by neglect strategy--of the country's historically best public housing system, while providing generous subsidies to developers to create an insufficient number of 'affordable' housing units, out of reach for many poor New Yorkers. Donovan's other key credential, from Obama's perspective, is that he is a graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a major incubator of neoliberal government housing policy. This outfit specializes in churning out 'scholars' that can effectively legitimate the starving of the public sector, and the providing of generous subsidies to developers, as an exercise in 'good government' and implementing 'best practices'.

Thus, it is no surprise, that when Donovan visited the city in early March he only met with 'responsible' non-profit leaders that agree with this neoliberal framework for (inadequately) addressing affordable housing needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and the US. On March 5th he sat down to chat with a collection of responsible non-profit that would not raise uncomfortable issues, like public housing, and who refused, in order to protect the secretary from any embarrassing protests, to divulge any information to grass roots organizations about when a where they would meet with Donovan. These vetted non-governmental 'civil society' leaders included Janey Bavishi of the State of Louisiana funded 'Equity and Inclusion' campaign--the same state that refused to give one dime for renters as part of the so-called Road Home program, Kalima Rose of Policy Link, another non-profit

think tank and advocacy group that refused to support the defense of public housing, and a host of other non-profits from New Orleans and the Gulf. In their meeting with Donovan, as explained in the Equity and Inclusion March 19th web newsletter, they did not raise one word of protest against the Obama administration's plan to demolish more public housing in New Orleans, while, at the same time, raising some important equity issues, including the state of Mississippi receiving federal government waivers that allowed them to redirect federal money intended for low and moderate income people to rebuild ports for the shipping industry. Thus, this meeting exemplified the crucial role of the non-profiters in suppressing any challenges to the pro-corporate neoliberal model by shaping their demands to fit within the policy framework that Obama and his neoliberal appointees, such as Donovan, find acceptable. Therefore, seeing the effective policing role the non-profits play, it is not a surprise that Obama, more so than even under Bush, is working to promote the non-profit sector. They act, particularly in post-Katrina New Orleans, as key adjuncts, partners, to the disaster capitalist agenda.

### **Obama/Donovan Shut Door on Grass Roots Activists Clamoring to Be Heard**

Donovan's--and by extension Obama's--treatment of public housing tenant leaders Sharon Jasper, Sam Jackson, Stephanie Mingo, Katrina survivor and holdout Mike Howells, and other members of the public housing movement during his March visit, underscores most dramatically the Obama administration's continuity with Bush when dealing with New Orleans. During the last visit of Bush's notoriously corrupt HUD secretary--Alphonso Jackson--to the city in the Spring of 2007, the public housing movement was relegated to screaming at the secretary and local public officials from across a police barricade. The protestors denounced HUD's plans to demolish 5,000 viable public housing apartments while the Bush appointee stood with Mayor Nagin and other local officials at a ribbon cutting ceremony for the reopening of a handful of apartments at a new mixed income community in the 9th ward. Shockingly, activists found themselves in the same position, literally, during Donovan's visit. On March 5th, at the same 'mixed income community', Donovan surrounded himself with the some of the same local officials that Jackson had gathered, along with some new faces, including UNITY for the homeless director Martha Kegel. This nonprofit official earned her place at the gathering by playing an indispensable role for Mayor Nagin evicting the homeless--who have doubled in number from their pre-Katrina levels--from various 'unsightly', highly visible, locations in the center of the city.

On the other side of the police barricades the public housing movement, just as they had during Alphonso Jackson's visit, raised the uncomfortable issues that the non-profit 'advocates'

would not. These included the demand that the Obama administration support Senate Bill 1668 that guarantees one-for-one replacement of all the public housing apartments demolished since Katrina as PUBLIC housing apartments, that is ones in which residents pay 30% of their income for rent and utilities. Second, they demanded that the remaining 100 apartments at the Lafitte development, in which residents moved into only a short six months before, not be demolished and the residents be allowed to stay in their homes. Third, they wanted the federal stimulus money allocated for the local housing authority to be used to include the repair of the Iberville development, the only fully intact traditional public housing development, which sits outside the French Quarter. This money is badly needed to repair and reopen over 200 empty apartments at the 800 plus complex, units that are desperately needed by the thousands of families that are on the public housing waiting list, which has not accepted new applicants since Katrina (For an excellent critique of the non-profit sector's solutions to housing, and a plan that places the reconstruction of the public sector at the center of any solution, see "Comments On the Draft 'Policy Recommendations to Support Gulf Coast Housing Recovery': A New Orleans Perspective", put out by May Day New Orleans, available at [http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/02/13679\\_comment.php#13714](http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/02/13679_comment.php#13714)).

### **Iberville and the Obama/Donovan Demolition-By-Neglect Strategy**

The public housing movement quickly received a response from Donovan/Obama to their demands--keep the bulldozers moving! At the end of March a notoriously repressive housing authority manager, Lois Watson, swept through the Lafitte development threatening these traumatized Katrina survivors with arrest if they did not immediately vacate the premises (Times Picayune, March 29, 2009). By April 1st all residents had moved out, and by late-April authorities placed a metal fence around the development to prepare for demolition of this historic, architectural gem, built by Creole artisans from the Treme neighborhood in the early 1940s, whose demise New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff denounced as 'a human and architectural tragedy of vast proportions'. Yet, Obama was not finished with this 'change you can believe in' for New Orleans. Diane Johnson, the federally imposed one person board of New Orleans housing authority, announced at an April 8th hearing that the Iberville and the remaining apartments at the BW Cooper developments, the only remaining traditional developments, would not get one dime of the \$34 million federal stimulus money awarded to HANO. Bush imposed Johnson as the new one-person board chair in May 2008, where, upon taking office, chillingly pronounced that "I understand demolition...just watch and see Diane Johnson". Johnson, with the full support of Obama, who has kept on this Bush appointee, as he is done in so many other areas, has kept her demolition promises. The failure to provide any money

for Iberville is a thinly veiled attempt to carry out demolition by neglect and thus pave the way for 'redevelopment' that will allow the ethnic and class cleansing of the community and the seizing of this long sought after property by real estate interests.

### **Obama Expands the Neo-Apartheid, 'Public-Private', Charter School System**

The appointment of Arne Duncan, the former 'CEO' of the Chicago school district, and a major proponent of privatized charter schools, made clear where Obama stands on 'education reform'. Proposals made by May Day New Orleans, C3/Hands Off Iberville and other grass roots organizations, to use public funds to create well-funded, democratically-run, broadly accessible, and useful public works, public schools and other public goods, is not even entertained. Instead, through a top-down strategy, as with housing, Duncan and other neoliberal education reformers--including, especially, Obama, as he made clear in his speech to the Business Roundtable--promote pouring public monies into for-profit and non-profit companies to administer--and profit from--the delivery of education services.

Thus, Duncan's approach by no means represents a divergence from what has happened to public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, but rather deepens the processes initiated by his predecessor. After the storm the State of Louisiana, under Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco, and with the full support of the majority African American New Orleans delegation in the State House and Senate, tore up the teachers union contract, fired all the teachers and support staff from cafeteria to janitors, and had the state, through the Recovery School District, take over almost all the schools. Of those that have reopened most--only half of the over 120 pre-storm schools were reopened--are now charter schools, run by an array of non- and for-profit companies, and overseen by a byzantine complex of unaccountable, self appointed boards, and advised by elite, corporate-linked think tanks, such as the Cowen Institute. Bush Education secretary Margaret Spelling stepped in and helped make this transformation a truly bipartisan effort by providing \$40 million, all of which was earmarked for charters, shortly after Katrina.

Yet, despite, or rather because of, this scenario, Education Secretary Duncan, during his March 20th swing through New Orleans, praised the 'phenomenal innovation going on', and praised 'the set of adults that are pushing a very strong reform agenda', in a city that has witnessed the widest and most rapid privatization of the any public school system in the country. Duncan also underscored his opposition to democratically controlled local school boards and that 'reform' requires authoritarian 'leadership from the top' (Times Picayune, March

21, 2009). He was right on the mark. His touting of authoritarianism is a recognition of the unpopularity of these neoliberal educational reforms and the need for strong arm tactics to impose them. The New Orleans case, in which the local elected school board was stripped of its control by the state executive, and Governor Blanco's lifting of the rule--while most New Orleanians were still in exile--that gave parents and teachers at targeted schools the right to vote on whether they want their schools to become charters, underscores the undemocratic nature of the whole agenda and the need for an authoritarian state to impose it.

This lifting of local control allowed maybe the most blatant racist takeover of all--the chartering of the formerly all-black, low-income, Fortier high school, located next to Tulane University, by the elite, 'magnet', selective admission, Robert Lusher school, named after, appropriately, a post-civil war era segregationist. Fortier, taken over through a collaboration with Tulane University, denies the entry to the former students, while guaranteeing admission, in a typical phony 'anti-racist' neoliberal multicultural form, to students of full time employees of Tulane and Loyola Universities, as well as the historically black universities of Dillard and Xavier. This school, which before Katrina regularly went without even toilet paper, now operates in a renovated facility, with plenty of amenities, and a 'progressive' multicultural student body, that excludes, in a neo-apartheid manner, the former low income black students, many of whom remain in the post-Katrina diaspora.

### **New Orleans Public Hospital Remains Closed**

Obama's failure to change course and tackle the pressing health care needs in post-Katrina needs is especially ominous considering that addressing health care was a major component of his campaign. After Katrina, Governor Blanco intervened, ordering out the Oklahoma national guard, German engineers and hospital staff that were cleaning out the main public hospital--Charity--which in fact incurred little damage. The Democratic Governor then declared Charity hospital, which provided critically needed care for the poor and uninsured, beyond repair and announced it would be permanently closed. Since then, New Orleans has had no major public health care facility to deal with those without health insurance, and lost its major source of psychiatric care, in a city where psychiatric illnesses have skyrocketed due to the varied problems people face in a post-disaster environment, problems further acerbated by the government's failure to reopen public services.

Here again, New Orleanians find no relief from the Obama administration. The State of Louisiana's plan, which the new Republican Governor Bobby Jindal--and apparent Obama challenger--- supports, will turn Charity into a much smaller teaching

hospital, as part of a new medical complex to be built in conjunction with the local Veterans Hospital. Although it is a state-level initiative, the federal government, through control of Medicaid dollars, the critical role of the Veterans hospital in the plan, and the moral power of the new president, has a variety of methods at their disposal to get the state to change course. Nonetheless, despite this leverage, the Obama administration has not exercised this power, but has, instead, continued the same federal government support begun by Bush.

### **Obama, Non-Profits, and Need for Building a Political Alternative**

An honest evaluation of Barack Obama's administration, one that looks at substance over symbolism reveals, at both home and abroad, a striking continuity with his predecessor. Although one can find differences in the style and discourse of the two leaders, the underlying program of the new administration continues to be that of militarism, of anti-working class attacks, and yes, substantively, a deeply racist one. He has put a new face on a still brutally racist, capitalist system. This continuity, as I have shown, is particularly the case in New Orleans where public services have been or on their way to being privatized or eliminated, and where, primarily due to this disaster capitalist agenda, almost half the population has been unable to return home, disproportionately female, black and, poor. Yet, at the same, as I have shown, New Orleans public housing movement, the campaign to reopen Charity hospital, and other struggles, along with the nationally reviving immigrant rights and anti-war movements, represent the kernels of a real political alternative-not the mirage of Obamania. But, as the New Orleans case reveals, for these movements, to make gains they will have to effectively traverse, expose and combat an array non-profit apologists for the new progressive face of the system, many of whom are lining up as part of non-profit -state-network that Obama, a particularly intelligent and foresighted representative of the ruling class, sees as an effective buffer in the face of the deepening capitalist crisis.

The war on affordable housing continues under General Obama.



## **OBAMA'S HUD CLOSES AND FENCES OFF N.O.'S LAFITTE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT**

**New Orleans Independent Media**

**May 1, 2009**

Workers contracted by the Housing Authority of New Orleans erected, in mid-April, an eight and a half foot high barbed wire fence around nearly one hundred apartments at the Lafitte Public Housing Development. The apartments enclosed were renovated and reoccupied just last year. All residents of the Lafitte Development were ordered by HANO to vacate their apartments by March 31st. By erecting the barbed-wire fence around the apartments, HANO, now under the direction of the Obama Administration, signals that the new administration is committed to implementing, without compromise, the Bush Era plan to demolish 4,500 units of public housing in post-Katrina New Orleans. Reinforcing the basic thrust of this position, on his recent visit to New Orleans HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan refused to meet with Lafitte residents by refusing to meet with Lafitte residents just weeks away from being evicted.

The March 31st closure of Lafitte and the subsequent fencing off of apartments at the development could not have come at a worse time for the renters of New Orleans. The number of homeless in New Orleans has, according to Unity for the Homeless, doubled since Katrina to 12,000. The total population of New Orleans, at last estimate, has dropped by about a third, 150,000, in comparison to the city's August 2005 population.. Official unemployment in Orleans Parish has risen from 4.4% in March 2008 to 7.3% in March 2009. More than 3,000 units of public housing have been demolished in the Fourth Planning District, where the Lafitte Development is located, over the last eighteen months. In addition, homeowner-dominated neighborhood associations, in alliance with local politicians, have successfully blocked the reopening of many multifamily apartment complexes in New Orleans East and elsewhere in the city . Renters constituted a majority of the city's pre-Katrina population.

The August 2008 reopening of 94 apartments at Lafitte was a concession by Mayor C. Ray Nagin to placate local and national opposition to HUD's June 2006 plan to demolish the B.W. Cooper, Lafitte, St. Bernard and C.J. Peete public housing developments. The day before Nagin announced that some Lafitte apartments would be reopened, police tasered, maced, beat and arrested opponents of the Big Four's demolition in and around City Hall. On that day, December 20, 2007, the New Orleans City Council voted to authorize the demolition of the Big Four.

The ascendancy of Barrack Obama to the Presidency raised the hopes of some Lafitte residents and local allies that HUD could

be persuaded to, at the very least, delay the date of closure at Lafitte. Early 2008 then presidential candidate Obama went on record as supporting a moratorium on the demolition of public housing in New Orleans. Throughout the first quarter of 2009, Lafitte residents and their supporters, including C3/ Hands Off Iberville and May Day New Orleans, waged a struggle to keep Lafitte open beyond March 31st. Actions included public meetings, letter writing campaigns, protests, and press conferences. In February N.O. public housing resident and activist Sam Jackson visited Washington D.C. and called on HUD to scuttle the plan to close Lafitte on March 31st.

Despite pressure from below, HANO and Obama's HUD continued to follow the script for Lafitte written by the Bush Administration. "Progressive" local non-profits did meet with Donovan on his junket to N.O. . However, during the meeting the representatives of the non-profits made no mention of the Lafitte situation despite having been asked to do so by public housing activists. Less than four weeks later HANO closed the Lafitte development. .

The recent closure of the Lafitte Development indicates that the Obama Administration is continuing the criminal policy of social cleansing in post-Katrina New Orleans by way of public housing demolition begun under the Bush Administration. That many of the people who have been driven out of Lafitte voted for Obama just a few months earlier is apparently of matter of little concern to the new administration. HUD Secretary Donovan made this clear on his visit to New Orleans by refusing to meet with Lafitte residents about to be evicted. The fact that grass roots struggle did save the Iberville Development from suffering the same fate as Lafitte shows that well timed action from below, not appeals to the goodwill of politicians, is the decisive factor in saving public housing in this time of crisis.

## Section 5

### What Happened to the Human Rights of Hurricane Survivors?

In late August of 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita left a path of destruction and serious human rights concerns in their wake. The storms displaced hundreds of thousands of people living in the Gulf Coast region of the United States, who consequently were entitled to the human rights protections defined by the UN's Guiding Principles on the Rights of Internally Displaced People. One of those rights is the right to return to their homes. Below are a few ways the U.S. government has violated the human right to housing of survivors.

#### UN's Guiding Principles:

##### Principle 1

*1. Internally displaced persons shall enjoy, in full equality, the same rights and freedoms under international and domestic law as do other persons in their country..*

- Redevelopment plans seem to be designed to limit the amount of affordable housing in New Orleans. Rebuilding of the Big Four would include only 37% of the pre-storm number.<sup>41</sup> Post- Katrina housing policy therefore dictates who will and will not be able to return by not re-housing its low-income residents.<sup>42</sup>

##### Principle 6

*1. Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.*

- About 4,500 households were displaced for the demolition and redevelopment of the Big Four. Upon returning to New Orleans, public housing residents of the Big Four public housing developments found that they had been barricaded from entering their own homes. Steel plates covered the windows and doors and fences surrounded the premises.<sup>43</sup>

##### Principle 7

*1. Prior to any decision requiring the displacement of persons, the authorities concerned shall ensure that all feasible alternatives are explored in order to avoid displacement altogether. Where no alternatives exist, all measures shall be taken to minimize displacement and its adverse effects.*

- Residents were locked out of the city council meeting when it was decided that the Big Four would be demolished. When residents protested, they were beaten, tasered, and arrested.<sup>44</sup> HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan visited New Orleans on the week of March 2, 2009 to determine the progress of rebuilding. He met with private developers, but not with the people that would be directly impacted by redevelopment

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/katrinawomenreportfeb2009/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/katrinawomenreportfeb2009/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.tulane.edu/~wc/katrinawomenreportfeb2009/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> <http://revcom.us/a/114/new-orleans-housing-en.html>

plans. In particular, public housing residents, who would face displacement by demolitions, were not allowed to meet with him.<sup>45</sup>

### **Principle 8**

*Displacement shall not be carried out in a manner that violates the rights to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected.*

- Rather than release thousands of undamaged and minimally damaged housing units to displaced residents, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) officials, the national agency charged with oversight over public housing across the nation, boarded up homes and purposefully failed to repair the units or take steps to mitigate further mold contamination.
- The dignity and personal possessions of the former residents have not been respected in this process. Contractors have emptied apartments and discarded and even sold the personal property of residents, including articles of great sentimental and emotional value, without their consent

### **Principle 12**

*1. Every human being has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.*

- By the end of March 2009 residents of Lafitte complex were threatened with arrest if they did not vacate their homes immediately.<sup>46</sup> Public housing residents who have attempted to return to their units have been arrested for trespassing. Additionally, residents have been arrested while protesting the demolition of their homes. On December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005 the New Orleans City Council first voted 7 to 0 in favor of demolishing the four public housing complexes. Residents had been locked out of the council meeting and protested outside, some arriving from as far as New York, where they had been living since the storm. Police beat, tased, and arrested protesters to maintain order.<sup>47</sup>

### **Principle 14**

*1. Every internally displaced person has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence.*

- With the lack of affordable housing in New Orleans, low-income residents are forced to relocate. According to a special report by the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, a large portion of evacuees were renters.<sup>48</sup> The distribution of vouchers, however, would do nothing to address the lack of rental property in New Orleans. FEMA officials recognized that “financial assistance without housing stock was not a solution,” furthermore, that if the number of vouchers distributed is not commensurate with the rental stock disaster victims would be dispersed throughout the 50 states.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21oCk3rgQ5I>

<sup>46</sup> <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2009/04/13880.php>

<sup>47</sup> <http://revcom.us/a/114/new-orleans-housing-en.html>

<sup>48</sup> [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/\\_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/\\_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/DisasterHousingInves.pdf)

Since Hurricane Katrina, there has been sustained United Nations' concern around post disaster recovery and the government's human rights obligations.

- July 2006- The UN Human Rights Council reminded the U.S. government to ensure that the rights to housing, healthcare, and education for poor communities, particularly African Americans, be protected in post Hurricane Katrina and Rita rebuilding.
- February 2008- The UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, and the UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, released a joint press statement calling for a halt to the demolition of public housing in post Katrina New Orleans.
- March 2008- The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) called upon the U.S. local and federal government to aid displaced victims of Katrina, noting the storm's disproportionate impact on low-income African Americans.
- May 2009- In his official report, the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, Doudou Diène, noted that the federal government was not ensuring the return of displaced persons to New Orleans and denounced the demolition of public housing there.
- July 2009 – The UN Advisory Group on Forced Evictions conducts a fact-finding mission to New Orleans to investigate the aftermath of the demolition of public housing and other instances of forced eviction.

## PRESS AND MEDIA

### **New Orleans:Resisting Demolition**

**Revolution Newspaper**

**December 30, 2007**

**by Carl Dix**

On Thursday, December 20, the New Orleans City Council was scheduled to vote on whether to demolish public housing in New Orleans. The city's plan is to destroy more than 4,600 units of low-cost housing. This is happening in a city where homelessness is growing. A city where tens of thousands have not been able to return since Katrina. A city where people are being evicted from FEMA trailers, where homeless encampments are being forcibly removed. And this plan has been met with resistance by people determined to be heard and determined to stop the demolitions.

Even before the City Council voted, the system delivered its answer in brutality:

*The police attacked people and arrested them inside the City Council meeting. BILLY CLUBS, PEPPER SPRAY, AND TASERS were also used outside against people protesting the demolitions.*

A protester who was at the City Council meeting told *Revolution*: "We were denied our human rights. HANO [Housing Authority of New Orleans] brought a lot of people in there, in favor of demolition. All of those people were able to get their people seated fairly quickly without any problems. And we was asking why weren't you letting more of our people in and also the people opposed to demolition, they were screening the guys. As we made the request, because we saw a number of seats available, maybe even 20 seats available for people to come in, but they had them close off the access to council chambers... We got up in protest, screaming, 'Let the people in! Let the people in!' And the

officers decided to silence us, so one of the officers grabbed me, put his hands on me. I told him don't put his hands on me, and the crowd was still chanting, 'Let the people in!' because they was illegally starting the process. Then another officer passed me up, so I started chanting again 'Let the people in.' So another officer took it upon himself to use physical enforcement to silence me. A number of police officers then jumped me, physically hitting me, striking me. Knocked me on the ground, then one SWAT team officer tasered me. So while I was being tasered, another officer asked me to put my hands behind my back, but I was paralyzed from the taser, by the volts. I was tasered again. So when I have two tasers in me I was tasered again. So I was tasered three times after being beaten and attacked by the police officers. They handcuffed me and dragged me out of the room. I was put in a paddy wagon and brought to jail."

Then the city council took their vote: seven votes to ZERO in favor of demolishing four large public housing developments.

A graphic display of bourgeois democracy in action.

Outrage On Top of All the Other Outrages

The night before the vote, TV news already announced that most of the city council was going to vote for demolition. It was also announced that cops would be out in large numbers to enforce order during the meeting. The Message: forget about protesting this blatant injustice, the powers-that-be have already decided to go ahead and demolish more than 4,600 units of public housing-homes that could be fixed up for people who desperately need a place to live. The city's plan is to destroy more than 4,600 units and replace them with "mixed income housing" which will have less than 800 affordable units.

On the day of the meeting, HUD and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) packed the council chambers with supporters of demolition. Several hundred people also came to the council meeting to voice their opposition to the demolitions. But the police closed and chained the gates to the City Council chambers before the meeting began. They claimed there was no more room—even though there were dozens of empty seats and lots of standing room.

More than 100 people demonstrated outside, chanting “Stop the Demolitions.” New Orleans residents who had been exiled after Katrina came from places like Houston and New York to oppose the demolitions, and they were enraged at being locked out of the council. Inside the chambers, people refused to let the meeting begin, demanding those locked out be allowed in. Cops grabbed several young men by their dreads. Mothers and grandmothers from the projects joined youth and others to condemn this repression while it was going on and throughout the session. To enforce “order,” the cops beat, tased and arrested people.

The crowd outside became enraged at the sight of people being dragged out in handcuffs. People surged against the chained gate forcing it to pop open. When some tried to get into the chambers the cops arrested several people, indiscriminately shot pepper spray into the crowd and started tasing people. Three women were tased, one of them in the back, sending her into convulsions. At least 15 people were arrested.

It was AFTER all this—after opponents of the demolition had been beaten, tased and arrested—that the City Council went through the formality of hearing public comment for and against demolition. And then voted unanimously to demolish the homes and communities of thousands of poor Black families.



Were any of the council members bothered by any of this repression? Not a bit. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "City Council members—some sipping water, others leafing through file folders—looked on impassively as a man was tasered, handcuffed and dragged from the council chambers."

Since Katrina, outrage after outrage has been perpetrated against the people of New Orleans. Tens of thousands left to die as Katrina's flood waters surged. People denied evacuation or rescue and food and water. People vilified and dissed as looters and thugs for taking what they needed to survive.

And now THIS—in a city where there is such a crying need for low-cost housing, the authorities are moving ahead with plans to demolish public housing. More than 200,000 New Orleans residents still live outside the city, 150,000 of them Black, unable to come back, in large part, because there's nowhere they can afford to live. Thousands are being evicted from FEMA trailers, and more than 12,000 people, more than double the number of homeless before Katrina, are living on the streets.

But the logic of capitalism sees no profit in providing low-cost housing for people. And plans to rebuild New Orleans have clearly been aimed at making it a city less Black, less poor, and more geared toward profitable enterprises like tourism.

Resistance Builds, Much More Needed

Resistance to the demolitions had been growing in the days leading up to the City Council meeting. At the BW Cooper development, where demolitions began, several people occupied apartments the day before the council vote. Two people chained themselves to the buildings, shutting down demolition efforts for much of the day. The authorities responded by declaring the whole

housing development a crime scene and threatening residents with arrest if they left their homes. One of these residents called in to a press conference held to support the occupations and spoke by phone on a TV newscast, letting people know she was "being held hostage" by the police. People involved in the occupations were given felony charges of terrorizing and "using a simulated explosive device."

Headlines and photographs were seen around the world—showing the resistance of the people to this latest attack. And much more resistance is needed to take on and beat back these demolitions. For the authorities, the only thing left to work out is the details of how people's homes will be demolished. But for many people, this battle is far from over. It has already been very important and very significant that this outrage has not been allowed to go down quietly, that it has been met with determined resistance from the people. And it is an outrageous exposure that in order to have their vote to carry through with this plan they had to lock people out of the meeting, beat, tase, pepper spray and arrest people.

The stakes in this battle are very high. People across the country, and around the world, witnessed the criminal way the system treated people after Katrina. And people have seen how the system has *continued* to mistreat and abandon the people of New Orleans—making it impossible for most to come back and rebuild their homes and lives. Politicians and the media continue to vilify Black people in New Orleans, calling them thugs and criminals and blaming them for the desperate conditions the system has put them in. It is right to rebel against all this! And it is heartening and inspiring to see people resisting in New Orleans.

New Orleans represents something special to people. Before Katrina it was seen as a vibrant city with a distinctive culture. Since Katrina, it has come to symbolize a blatant concentration of the whole history and the continuing reality of how this system oppresses Black people. There has been widespread sentiment among millions of people of wanting to stand with the people in New Orleans, to do something to help. And in spite of government neglect and roadblocks, tens of thousands of volunteers of many different nationalities and walks of life have come to New Orleans to gut houses, clean up schools, and help the rebuilding effort in other ways. In such a situation, RESISTANCE in New Orleans resonates with many people who could be allies in this struggle, who feel that this resistance has RIGHT ON ITS SIDE, who could "have the people's back."

Resistance to the demolitions has already struck a chord with and impacted many different kinds of people. In mid-December, dozens of mostly youthful volunteers responded to a call to come down to help stop the demolitions. Right after the City Council vote, a crew of people, including some youth from Jena, came to New Orleans to distribute *Revolution* newspaper.

On December 5, Brad Pitt was on the Larry King show talking about his project to rebuild eco-friendly housing in the Ninth Ward (a poor Black neighborhood devastated by floods). He expressed real concern about the situation people are in. Speaking about the scene at the City Council meeting, he said: "What yesterday certainly reflects is the frustration and the helplessness that families are facing here. And, again, you know, it's been two-and-a-half years now. And, again, I don't know the details. I know there was some arguments that these places created crime. I didn't hear the argument that answers that for me, is that you've got to address education, you've got to address health, you've

got to address opportunities. And until you address that, what do you expect is going to be there? So I don't know that the issue is just about the housing itself. But, again, I don't know enough. What I do know is that this tells you what an open nerve this place still is. And as hopeful and as great spirit as the people maintain here, you know, they need some help."

There is much need, and great possibility, for the resistance to these demolitions to grow broader and become more determined. The powers-that-be are serious about rebuilding a smaller, whiter New Orleans, with much of its Black population driven out. In a real way, this concentrates the killing program this system has for Black people nationwide.

As the resistance grows and becomes more determined, it can attract people who hate the outrages this system continues to inflict on the people and want to see a different and better way for people to live. It can bring many more forward to join the struggle, and through the course of resisting, people can learn what they're up against and what it'll take to win. It can win allies from amongst people from many different backgrounds. And all this can and must be part of building a broad revolutionary movement.

**UNITED NATIONS**  
**Press Release**  
**February 28, 2008**

Geneva, 28 February 2008: --UN Experts call on U.S. Government to halt ongoing evictions and to take immediate steps to protect the human rights of African-Americans affected by Hurricane Katrina and the demolition of public housing in New Orleans, Louisiana

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, Miloon Kothari, and the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, Gay McDougall, issued the following statement today:

Geneva, 28 February 2008: -- We are deeply concerned about information we continue to receive about the housing situation of people in New Orleans, Louisiana and the Gulf Coast region. African-American communities were badly affected by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The spiraling costs of private housing and rental units, and in particular the demolition of public housing, puts these communities in further distress, increasing poverty and homelessness. There are reports that more than 12,000 people are homeless in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area alone.

A number of reports suggest that federal, led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and local government decisions concerning public housing in New Orleans would lead to the demolition of thousands of public housing units affecting approximately 5,000 families who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. The demolition of the St. Bernard public housing development apparently commenced the week of 18 February 2008 and others are planned for the Lafitte, B.W. Cooper, and C.J. Peete public housing developments.

Meaningful consultation and participation in decision-making of communities and families affected by these demolitions and related redevelopment proposals appears not to have taken place. While we understand the intention to replace the demolished housing, we understand that only a portion of the new housing units will be for residents in need of subsidized housing and the remainder will be offered at the market rate. Further, we understand that the new housing will not be available for a significant period of time nor will there be one for one replacement for housing units destroyed. These demolitions, therefore, could effectively deny thousands of African-American residents their right to return to housing from which they were displaced by the hurricane.

The authorities claim that the demolition of public housing is not intentionally discriminatory. Notwithstanding the validity of these claims, the lack of consultation with those affected and the disproportionate impact on poorer and predominantly African-American residents and former residents would result in the denial of internationally recognized human rights.

The right to an adequate standard of living enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right to adequate housing. The international community has made it clear that those displaced from their place of residence, whether by conflict or natural disaster, should have their rights particularly protected in reconstruction efforts. The inability of former residents of public housing to return to the homes they occupied prior to Hurricane Katrina would in practice amount to an eviction for those who returned or wish to return. International human rights law prohibits evictions from taking place without due process, including the right of those evicted to be given due notice and opportunity to appeal eviction decisions. It also requires the authorities to ensure that large-scale evictions do not result in massive homelessness and to consult those affected on relocation or alternative housing solutions.

International human rights law, including relevant provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, also clearly prohibits actions that result in a discriminatory impact denying individuals or group's equal enjoyment of human rights because of their race, ethnicity, social or other status.

We therefore call on the Federal Government and State and local authorities to immediately halt the demolitions of public housing in New Orleans. This measure should be accompanied by all measures ensuring genuine consultation and participation of current residents - or former residents wishing to return - in all relevant decisions. We also call on the authorities to ensure that redevelopment plans do not discriminate against former residents and that every effort is made to consider alternatives to demolition or redevelopment proposals, so as to protect the rights of the poorer and predominantly African-American communities displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

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The above mentioned UN independent experts sent a letter to the US Government on 17 December 2007 in regard to this situation noting their concern about allegations received and asking for further information. They encourage the authorities to give urgent attention to this issue and consider alternative proposals, such as those reflected in the provisions of draft

Senate Bill 1668, which would be more protective of the rights of the more vulnerable groups affected by the Hurricane.

For further information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing and the Independent Expert on minority issues, please consult respectively the following websites: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/index.htm> and <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/minorities/expert/index.htm>

**PRESS RELEASE**

**International Activists Decry the Demolition of Public Housing in New Orleans**

**April 10, 2008**

On April 10, 2008, the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI) formally adopted New Orleans, Louisiana as the most recent site for its global Zero Evictions Campaign. IAI is particularly dismayed over the recent demolitions of public housing in New Orleans, especially as they violate international human rights. IAI has garnered international support for public housing residents living in New Orleans.

So far, over 70 organizations spanning five continents have endorsed the Stop the Evictions and Corruption in New Orleans campaign. IAI has also sent a formal letter to President George W. Bush, requesting that he halt any further demolitions of public housing in New Orleans and ensure the right to participation for public housing residents in the city's rebuilding process.

Cesare Ottolini of the IAI stated: "The world has to know about the suffering of public housing residents taking place in New Orleans, particularly among African Americans and poor people. Therefore, today we have launched a global platform, so that international public opinion can convince the U.S. government, by the force of our solidarity, to respect the rule of law and human rights. Since we are dealing with a true humanitarian crisis, we have requested urgent action on the part of our international allies, and have requested the immediate involvement of the UN Advisory Group on Forced Evictions of UN-Habitat."

The Stop the Evictions and Corruption in New Orleans campaign is the latest international support for public housing residents in New Orleans. In February 2007, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and the UN Independent Expert on Minority Rights issued a joint press release urging the U.S. government to halt the demolitions. On March 7, 2008, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in its Concluding Remarks to the U.S. report likewise noted concern for the then pending demolitions. The Committee noted the "disparate impact that [the] natural disaster[s] continue to have on low income African Americans" and called for local and federal governments to help Katrina's displaced.

To learn more about the Stop the Evictions and Corruption in New Orleans campaign and become an endorser, visit:

<http://eng.habitants.org/Campaigns-Zero-Evictions>

Contact:

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Advocates for Environmental Human Rights • American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi • Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now • Center for Fair Housing • Children’s Defense Fund Action Council • Coastal Women for Change • Critical Resistance • Deep South Center for Environmental Justice • Emerging ChangeMakers Network • Friends and Families of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children • Fyre Youth Squad • Gert Town Revival Initiative • Institute for Women and Ethnic Studies • Louisiana Justice Institute • Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward Health Clinic • May Day New Orleans • Mennonite Church Central Committee • Mississippi Center for Justice • Moving Forward Gulf Coast • National Economic and Social Rights Initiative • National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness • New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival • New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice • New York Solidarity Coalitions with Katrina and Rita Survivors • North Gulfport Community Land Trust • Northeast Regional Survivors Assembly • People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond • Portersville Revival Group • Praxis Project • STAND for Dignity • Turkey Creek Community Initiatives • United Hearts Community Action Agency • US Human Rights Network

March 17, 2009

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Secretary Hillary Clinton  
U.S. Department of State  
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Ms. Melody Barnes, Director  
Domestic Policy Council  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.  
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**RE: Alignment of Gulf Region Disaster Response and Recovery Efforts with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement**

Dear Ms. Napolitano, Mr. Donovan, Ms. Clinton and Ms. Barnes:

We are residents of the Gulf Region and leaders of social justice organizations who urge your cooperation in ending the displacement of Gulf Region residents by aligning Gulf Region disaster response and recovery efforts with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

We commend Secretaries Napolitano and Donovan for their visit to the Gulf Region on March 5-6, 2009, and are thankful for Secretary Clinton's recent public statement that human rights must be protected both abroad and at home. We are encouraged by these promising developments, and request a meeting with your offices to discuss the need for coordination among federal departments to not only remove governmental barriers to our recovery, but also to implement human rights-based standards for rebuilding and restoring our lives and communities.

Although Hurricane Katrina and failed levees caused the largest population displacement in modern U.S. history, which uprooted approximately 750,000 people from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, governmental responses initiated by the previous administration have prolonged our displacement more than three years after the storm. President Obama's condemnation of the previous administration's responses is an opportunity for our government to develop new policies and practices that are aligned with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. We recommend that your offices review the report by the Institute for Southern Studies, *Hurricane Katrina and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: A Global Human Rights Perspective on a National Disaster*, which documents the need for implementation of the UN Guiding Principles in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (available at [www.southernstudies.org/southern\\_exposure/2008/11/hurricane-katrina-and-human-rights.html](http://www.southernstudies.org/southern_exposure/2008/11/hurricane-katrina-and-human-rights.html)).

Under the administrations of both William Clinton and George W. Bush, our government has consistently supported the UN Guiding Principles in an international context. As a co-sponsor of two UN resolutions, our government recognizes the UN Guiding Principles as "an important tool for dealing with situations of internal displacement" and welcomed "the fact that an increasing number of States . . . are applying [the UN Guiding Principles] as a standard." (UN, Commission on Human Rights, Resolution 2003/51, Apr. 23, 2003; UN, General Assembly, Resolution 54/167, Dec. 17, 1999). Furthermore, nearly one year prior to Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Department of State issued a foreign aid policy that is based on the UN Guiding Principles. This policy presents a detailed commitment by our government to protect the human rights of internally displaced people in foreign countries through a three-phase plan of action that

provides humanitarian assistance, reintegration and transition assistance, and long-term development assistance. (USAID Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy, Oct. 2004, PD-ACA-558).

However, the Hurricane Katrina disaster response agenda established by the previous administration is in conflict with the UN Guiding Principles and undermines our fundamental human rights, as noted by two UN treaty monitoring committees. In the year following Hurricane Katrina, the United Nations' Human Rights Committee urged our government to:

“. . . review its practices and policies to ensure the full implementation of its obligations to protect life and the prohibition of discrimination, whether direct or indirect, as well as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, in the areas of disaster prevention and preparedness, emergency assistance, and relief measures. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it should increase its efforts to ensure the rights of poor people and in particular African Americans are fully taken into consideration in the reconstruction plans with regard to housing, education, and healthcare.”

UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on United States of America, 87<sup>th</sup> Session, July 10-28, 2006. The UN Human Rights Committee requested that our government submit a report regarding its follow-up to the recommendation quoted above, which has not occurred.

And less than a year ago, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination similarly called on our government to:

“. . . increase its efforts in order to facilitate the return of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina to their homes, if feasible, or to guarantee access to adequate and affordable housing in their place of habitual residence. In particular the Committee calls on [the US Government] to ensure that every effort is made to ensure genuine consultation and participation of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina in the design and implementation of all decisions affecting them.”

UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 72<sup>nd</sup> Session, February 18-March 7, 2008. Similar to the UN Human Rights Committee, this committee also requested a follow-up report within one year. The Bush administration submitted a woefully inadequate report in January 2009 that merely identified disaster response programs and presented the federal expenditures for each program, but did not include any analysis whatsoever of

these programs which have proven to be highly ineffective in achieving the recommendations urged by the committee.

Without corrective action by the Obama administration, as urged by the UN treaty-monitoring bodies, the prolonged displacement of Gulf Region residents will continue and deepen setbacks that can last into the next generation. Displacement destabilizes families, who have been forced to move multiple times in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and continue to face significant hardships in finding permanent affordable housing and employment, accessing healthcare that includes mental health treatment, and ensuring that their children's educational needs are met. Even for those of us who have returned to our communities, the issue of displacement has not lost its relevance and urgency, as many of us remain separated from family members and the need for basic services (such as housing, hospitals, employment, flood protection, transportation, daycare centers, schools, grocery stores, churches, community and recreational centers) remains largely unmet.

Out of this crisis, there is the opportunity for implementing the UN Guiding Principles as the standard of care in America in times of disaster. In the absence of such implementation, we have been subjected to disaster response programs that result in ethnic cleansing – which is prohibited under principle 6 of the Guiding Principles. For example, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued the *Risk and Reliability Report* in June 2007, which reveals racial disparities in levee upgrades and repairs: predominantly African American neighborhoods are afforded floodwater reductions ranging from six inches to 1.5 feet whereas floodwater reduction in predominantly Caucasian neighborhoods would be 5.5 feet. Native American tribes in the Gulf Region struggle to rebuild communities that are threatened by coastal erosion – a phenomenon that has been studied for years, but has not resulted in wetlands restoration or practical solutions that confront the damaging effects of oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico. Controversial post-Katrina development projects that have been funded by HUD and FEMA entail the permanent displacement of African Americans from public housing developments and neighborhoods. Under these destabilizing and stressful conditions, women and children face abuse and exploitation. This dire situation warrants a change in governmental response that sets as its goal ending displacement through the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

We look forward to a meeting with your departments to further discuss the corrective actions that are urgently needed now to ensure the recovery of Gulf Region residents. Please contact Ms. Michele Roberts, Campaign & Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, to coordinate arrangements for this meeting. Her business card is attached to this letter.

Very truly yours,

Monique Harden & Nathalie Walker, Co-Directors & Attorneys

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OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR  
COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Monique Harden  
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JUN 23 2009

Dear Ms. Harden:

On behalf of Secretary Donovan, thank you for your letter concerning the citizens affected by the disasters throughout the Gulf Coast region in 2005. HUD has played a valuable role in assisting the states and citizens affected by Hurricane Katrina. HUD's Community Development Block Grant program has provided over \$19.7 billion to assist citizens as directed by Congress. The Department continues to work with Congress, states and local governments to assist in the recovery efforts.

The Department appreciates the multiple efforts of the various organizations helping citizens to rebuild their lives. HUD understands from your letter some residents and leaders of various social justice organizations in the Gulf Region propose that the United States use the United Nations' "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" when implementing governmental response to natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. Your letter also suggests that HUD should review the report by the Institute for Southern Studies entitled "Hurricane Katrina and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: A Global Human Rights Perspective on a National Disaster." The Department welcomes these suggestions and will take them into consideration.

The Department agrees that the government-wide response to natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina needs improvement. In this regard, HUD is currently working and will continue to work with Congress, other federal agencies and states and local governments to ensure that those states and citizens affected by natural disasters receive the most efficient and effective federal assistance possible.

Thank you for your interest in the Department's programs.

Sincerely,

Nelson R. Bregón  
General Deputy Assistant Secretary