

PRINCIPLES AND PRIORITIES FOR REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS

Joint Statement by Black Social Scientists*

*Drafted and endorsed by the Association of Black Sociologists, National Association of Black Social Workers, and the Planning and Black Community Division of the American Planners Association, the Board of the National Organization of Minority Architects, the Executive Director of the National Forum of Black Public Administrators, and concerned Black economists; coordinated by William E. Spriggs, senior fellow, Economic Policy Institute

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, national attention has been riveted on the devastation and on failures of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and of federal, state and local coordination in the evacuation and rescue. The poor and Black, the stranded children and elderly, and the huddled families on rooftops refused to be swept from neglected neighborhoods and into the crowded Superdome without first sending a powerful, graphic message to the world that we are a nation that has failed to address the inequities of race, gender, age and class.

We, a group of concerned African-American social scientists, take this opportunity to respond, not just to the crisis arising from Hurricane Katrina, but to the problems that predated it. The scale of loss in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi and the psychological trauma of both the hurricane and governance failures will have long-term consequences for those displaced and evacuated. Those most deeply affected are those with the least resources and social support system needed for recovery. The poverty rate in the New Orleans metropolitan area is 18.4 percent and in Orleans Parish, 30 percent. In some of the most devastated areas the poverty rate is over 36 percent. Among African-Americans in the city of New Orleans, the poverty rate is 35 percent.

We fear that in the urgency to relocate and disperse this group of largely poor and Black displaced residents there is little planning for their return and recovery. (Distributing \$2,000 debit cards to each family is a stopgap, not a plan.) The world is watching to see if this nation can tackle the inequities that this storm so savagely revealed, while rebuilding a sustainable city that welcomes all its displaced residents home. We must develop a long-term strategy that includes using the expertise and knowledge of local and grassroots resources with the large-scale means of the federal government to directly benefit the residents and businesses in the areas affected by the disaster.

There is need of a plan for the recovery of the poor people of New Orleans, both those who choose to return and those who do not. We propose a general set of guidelines for the rebuilding process in the short and long run that keeps these displaced residents from being transferred from one bad situation to another.

- I. **Relief funds**, both public and private, should be used to address the problems of poverty that pre-dated Katrina as well as the immediate needs in its aftermath. A special social safety-net program should be established for all displaced persons and communities, in Louisiana and Mississippi affected by Hurricane Katrina. In order to meet their basic needs:
 - A. **Existing federal anti-poverty programs** administered by the states should be expanded for a period of five years.
 - B. **The exhaustion of currently received benefits** in the past, or near future, would not affect eligibility.

C. **The five-year minimum commitment** would involve expanding existing federal and state programs along with creating new programs designed to meet the specific needs of the hurricane victims. At a minimum, these efforts should provide the following, creating a federally coordinated set of eligibility standards, and funding, to expedite access to:

1. **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)** funds, exempting their participation from counting in state goals, timetables and exemption limits;
2. **Food Stamp Program** extension;
3. **Medical insurance** assistance, access to Medicaid and State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP);
4. **Household furnishing** and clothes grants;
5. **Rent subsidies** for existing units; and the new construction of rent-subsidized and publicly-owned housing, with additional federal funds, so that applicants do not displace others already on waiting lists for Section 8 housing vouchers, or other federal/state/local housing assistance;
6. **Day care** with additional federal funds to not count against current state Child Care Block Grants, or day care assistance funded through state TANF funds;
7. **Job placement assistance**;
8. **Unemployment insurance**, waiving existing waiting periods and earnings tests;
9. **Tuition free occupational training or higher education** should be provided to residents.

II. **An expert group** should be convened, to include scholars engaged in research and evaluation of anti-poverty and community building programs, organizations engaged in the implementation of these programs, and community organizers historically active in the New Orleans-Biloxi region, to develop a plan to address the long-term housing, employment and social needs of the displaced residents. This group's charge should include:

- A. **Local Input**—Development strategies must be locally derived, but set within in a regional context. The private sector (both locally and nationally) needs to play an active and continuing role. Organizations that have been active in the poor, Black and minority communities in New Orleans must have a role in the planning process.
- B. **Comprehensive Planning**—Policy guides must be developed to facilitate rebuilding efforts that recognize the linkages and interrelationships for entire communities, cities and even regions over the next 20 years. A multiyear process would ensure inclusiveness and work closely with residents and other professionals to identify and describe community characteristics, articulate goals, and explore alternative plans for the future.
- C. **Strategic Community Planning**—A focused and inward-looking process must occur at the neighborhood/community-level that explores a variety of policies and strategies to be implemented within a five-year period of plan acceptance. This would include an analysis of Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) with community residents and stakeholders whose involvement and acceptance of the plan is an essential ingredient of its success.

D. Affordable Housing

1. True affordability for low income families. At a minimum, housing is shelter from the elements. However, expanded beyond its utility as shelter, future housing along a rebuilt Gulf Coast will take on a variety of socio-economic characteristics and one must be affordability.
2. Evaluating and assessing strategies to provide affordable and decent housing in livable communities for those displaced regardless of whether they choose to return to the area or relocate.
3. Affordability must be the rule regardless of whether the housing is offered as rental or ownership. Affordability also must present the opportunity of resale above a financial loss.
4. Rights of existing tenants should be assured. Where federal assistance is offered to landlords, the rights of previous tenants must be assured, giving them continued tenant rights as established by any lease then in force, and extending the rights of the lease in those cases where it expired during the rebuilding efforts.
5. Amend Section 152 of the federal Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 to designate New Orleans as a participating site for the Moving to Opportunity Program. Efforts to rebuild New Orleans should try to prevent the isolation of poor people, and so should increase their choices to live throughout the city.
6. A system of community-owned and controlled land trusts should be established in historically impoverished neighborhoods. This would aid the resettlement process by recreating and supporting existing networks of cooperation, and allow pooling of resources, joint ownership and control of resources, and community-based enterprise development. It would also build upon the history, knowledge, and vision of community members. Private, federal, and state support for such an endeavor would be designed to limit the constant displacement, homelessness, family disruption, and psychological stress typically experienced by communities facing massive redevelopment.

E. Employment—Successful economic development must provide living-wage jobs and business development. Living-wage jobs will afford a standard of living commensurate with the city-wide environment. Restoration of former business enterprises and the creation of new ones will serve as an essential wealth-building priority in any effort to rebuild Gulf Coast Black communities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

1. Historically, the aftermath of disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes is accompanied by a spurt of construction activity. Those displaced by Hurricane Katrina who return to New Orleans should be the first in line for these jobs. First source agreements tied to federal relief funds would help make this happen.
2. Proposing a plan to address the long-term employment prospects of the displaced residents:
3. Finding employment is an immediate imperative. We cite the development of the Jobs4Katrina website as a good first step. In addition, sufficient resources are needed for the following:
 - a. High quality childcare. Displaced families are likely to have had child care arrangements disrupted. Resources need to be provided for high-quality childcare

that addresses the specific mental health needs of these smallest survivors and incorporates an early childhood education component.

b. Access to transportation:

- i. Transportation permits the efficient movement of goods, services, and recreation. In the movement of these factors, residents must be able to afford the system. The role of public and private partnership is important in bringing about an improved transportation network in both the rural and central city areas. In addition, circulation consists of walkable areas, non-interfering barriers, and public safety. Not everyone needs to own an automobile; but everyone must be able to move from one location to another without stress or pain.
- ii. The people who were stranded in New Orleans are people who did not have access to transportation. They are now being relocated to many cities with limited public transportation systems.

III. Full Participation of Minority Owned Firms in Restoration—there needs to be a specific set of goals put into place to insure the full participation of minority owned firms in the contracting process for restoration. Federal agencies should not combine these efforts within existing targets and goals.

- A. Special attention should be given to locally owned minority-owned firms.
- B. Special provisions should be made for assistance in bonding, where bonding is required. SBA should strengthen and streamline its Bond Guarantee program, with special funding made available to fund Katrina relief, and continue the moratorium on fees charged to surety bonding companies for duration of the Katrina response.
- C. The active participation of minority engineering and architecture firms in particular should be provided for, as these contracts are not awarded on the basis of low-bid.
- D. It should be a special focus of SBA Loan programs to help the minority owned firms in New Orleans, half the Black business capacity in Louisiana, get back up and running.
- E. A system of community-owned and controlled cooperatives should be established in historically impoverished neighborhoods. This would aid the resettlement process by allowing the pooling of resources, joint ownership and control of resources, and community-based enterprise development. It would also build upon the history, knowledge, and vision of community members. Private, federal, and state support for such an endeavor would be designed to limit the potential for the movement firms only seeking to take advantage of economic opportunity resulting from short-term tax or other development assistance.

IV. Mental Health Needs—Psychological and medical help for survivors must continue for some time. We still do not know the long-term psychological consequences of the traumas of surviving a hurricane, flood, and inadequate emergency relief, or the health consequences of exposure to the toxic floodwaters.

V. Aid to Receiving Areas—Federal resources are also essential to provide incentives for cities that have accepted evacuees to accept them as long-term residents. This includes funding for educational services, health care, and workforce development.

VI. Local Government Financing—Many of the governmental jurisdictions across the Gulf Coast region crippled by the two hurricanes also face the daunting task of trying to figure out how to meet basic responsibilities to their citizens. With a loss of basic revenue streams local governments throughout the Gulf Coast are scrambling to fund basic services while hoping to avoid certain default and possible bankruptcy.

- A. There must be more flexibility allowed for municipalities with losses of incoming revenues to pay for essential services, salaries and overtime during times of devastation and great loss.
- B. There is a need to develop new and creative financing alternatives to help local jurisdictions to generate interim revenues, have available deferral, restructuring, and/or forbearance solutions for immediate debt relief while their communities and the businesses and other activities that generate tax revenue are rebuilt and recover.
- C. Modification of the Stafford Act to provide more flexibility for local government is but one of the solutions that should be considered

VII. Ecological Restoration—The Gulf Coast is an area of ecological charm and beauty. Equally, it is an area of sensitivity and vulnerability. Clean water, non-polluted air, and uncontaminated soil are essential to healthy living. As stewards of nature, we must provide systems that ensure the long term preservation of the environment while allowing use by current residents and businesses.

VIII. Emergency Response—Better emergency response procedures are needed. Given the interdisciplinary nature of planning and emphases on process and coordination the field offers, members of the Planning and the Black Community Division of the American Planning Association (PBCD) members would assume a lead role in developing an emergency response plan that coordinates national Black organizations with organizations at the local-municipality and community-based levels. Such a plan could include a separate listing of public administrators, businesses, nonprofits, and professional organizations for procurement by federal, state and local officials during times of crisis.

IX. Commission on Racial Inequality—A special commission should be established to address existing discriminatory practices and to ensure equity in the redevelopment process. Data should be collected on those affected by Hurricane Katrina so as to permit study of the effects of dislocation on the economic status and on the mental and physical health of those who have been evacuated.

X. Assistance to Xavier University of New Orleans, Dillard University and the Southern University—New Orleans campuses affected by Hurricane Katrina. These schools have been forced to close for the Fall semester. With small endowments, the interruption in revenues may prove catastrophic. Further, some of the buildings on these campuses have significant historical importance.

- A. Funds should be identified to compensate them for lost income. The insurance for lost income should be decided as quickly as possible to allow the universities to maintain their payrolls. This will help to retain faculty and staff who have now scattered.

B. Insure the full restoration of their buildings.

C. Special student assistance grants should be extended to compensate the students in returning to campus, as the students have made an additional trip away from campus.

This will help give students an incentive to return to campus, especially those who have returned home and are now enrolled for the Fall at other colleges and universities.

XI. UN World Cultural Heritage site—The neighborhoods of New Orleans should be designated as a United Nations' World Cultural Heritage site to begin the process of recognizing the importance of the city to the world. This project would also be dedicated to preventing the further denigration of centuries-old African-American cultural traditions indigenous to the region. While we value the historical and cultural heritage of New Orleans and support the preservation of these sites, if the choice is between rebuilding the city as it was or transforming the lives of its former residents, we vote for the people.

We are eager to be involved in rebuilding the Gulf Coast. Ethical standards must be employed. Exclusionary plans and programs are not to be tolerated. The priority must be to those who are the least able to restore their lives. Control and decision making must be in the hands of original and historic residents themselves. We pledge our support and offer our help to those communities and organizations that honor our principles and adhere to our guidelines.