

August 25-31 Commemoration of Hurricane Katrina
and the Great Flood:

**A Call for
Grassroots National Action to Support
Housing Rights for Public Housing**



**Right of Return:
one year later**



In New Orleans for 2006 Commemoration week

Community leaders and local organizers will hold events throughout the commemoration week of August 25-31, 2006 to remember the losses suffered by New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region, as well as to renew the call to action for local and federal government to address the still very pressing needs of residents in the Gulf Coast region.

On August 30, 2006 New Orleans public housing residents and supporters will take public action to demand HUD to reopen the vast lot of **undamaged** public housing. We invite you to join our cause.

The goal of Survivor's Village's grassroots commemoration events is to provide public housing residents a voice to tell real stories of hope, distress, and rebuilding, as well as to demand the Right of Return for public housing residents. Please join us across the country by organizing a local solidarity action. For more information please contact Annie Chen at survivorsvillage@gmail.com.

Advocate online

- **Sign up for Survivor's Village updates** online at www.survivorsvillage.com.
- **Host a link to Survivor's Village** on your personal or organizational website. Encourage those who visit your website to find out more about the campaign by linking to www.survivorsvillage.com
- **Link to an action alert for letters to Alphonso Jackson** at www.congressweb.com/cweb4/index.cfm?orgcode=tp&hotissue=19

Organize an event in your city during August 25-31 Commemoration

- **Organize a policy breakfast.** Keeping housing affordable and accessible is a battle for every city. Invite a community member involved in the fight to retain affordable and public housing to deliver a message about what policies can strengthen housing rights in your community. Also use this event to educate your local elected officials on public housing eradication in New Orleans and encourage them to take action.
- **Organize a rally.** Use City Hall, a federal building, or another appropriate public space as a meeting ground for supporters of Survivor's Village to raise awareness grab the public's attention while calling for the reopening of public housing in New Orleans.
- **Organize a panel discussion.** Invite multiple advocates for public and affordable housing or community leaders to share their insights and answer questions about reopening public housing in New Orleans in a moderated discussion. Invite speakers in far ranging fields such as human rights, affordable housing advocacy, city planning officials, social and racial justice, and labor groups.
- **Organize a public interest teach-in.** Teach-ins create a space for everyone to participate in lectures, ask questions, and debate the strategies and solutions to the regional, national, and global rise in government evictions.
- **Hold a public art event** with a theme related to housing rights. Use prominent visuals like levees to symbolize community resistance to the eradication of public and affordable housing.
- **Download flyers** from our the "Resources" page of our website to hand out at your event.
- **If you plan to be in New Orleans** during the week of Commemoration, consider pitching a tent and staying at Survivor's Village on the 3800 block of St. Bernard Avenue to demonstrate support and solidarity for the public housing struggle. Survivor's Village welcomes all supporters! For more information, contact Endesha Juakali at 504-239-2907.

Quotes and points for organizing around the public housing issue



- *Safe, decent, and affordable housing everywhere is a right, not a privilege.*
- *Public housing residents are coming back*
- *Public housing for survivors, not developers*

- *“Displaced by Katrina, evicted by HUD”*
- *“HUD says cut back, we say fight back”*
- *“Bring New Orleans back home now”*
- *No evictions!*
- *No demolition!*
- *The bricks saved our lives!*
- *No justice, no peace*



- *The Right to Return is guaranteed under the UN International Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons, which is explicitly supported by USAID as “a useful tool and framework for dealing with IDPs (USAID Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy)”*

For more information and resources visit www.survivorsvillage.com
or contact Annie Chen at survivorsvillage@gmail.com

Educate media about the very crippling housing market that New Orleanians face as they try to return. Not among the least of those affected are public housing residents who, since the hurricanes, have been locked out of their undamaged homes where they hold leases. Reopening public housing will allow those who have been forced into the private sector to return to their homes, and ease the housing crunch in the city. Renew the case for New Orleans that decent, affordable housing is a human right, as is the Right of Return for all Gulf Coast residents.

The fight to keep public and affordable housing is a battle in every city. Use the week surrounding commemoration, when housing availability in New Orleans will be a hot button issue, to educate media about your local housing struggles. Indeed, broader recognition of the universal plight of low-income residents to attain decent, affordable housing everywhere is necessary. Start educating the media on your topic early, as the more familiar the press and other media is with your issue, the more likely they will give fair weight to your side.

Strategies

• **Write an op-ed** on affordable and public housing issues locally and connect to the public housing struggle in New Orleans. One way to do this is to reference New Orleans as the federal test case for large-scale eradication of public housing that could occur in other places. Link to human rights, the racial justice, global human displacement, and illustrations of public housing models that have worked in other places.

• **Write letters to the editor** in response to positive and negative articles about and related to public and affordable housing. Offer positive feedback to articles that do a good job presenting a balanced view of public housing. For articles that are less balanced, challenge facts, articulate a more balanced view, and point out the unfair stigmas about public housing residents prevalent in public opinion.

• **See the attached “Housing Myths”** and the “Resources” section of our website for more rebuttals, research, and facts.

Editorial Boards

Help local media get to know your cause—request a meeting with the editorial board of the local newspaper to educate the editorial writers on issues of public housing shortage and encourage them to take a position on public housing eradication locally and in New Orleans.

Request a meeting with the editorial board

Send a one-page letter to request a meeting. Clearly state why a meeting now on your topic would be timely now rather than later, and lay out your central argument succinctly. Also include the names and affiliations you intend to bring to the meeting.

For the meeting

- Come prepared. Bring supporting materials with you, even if it's just a one-page summary of the main points you want to get across. Take along a few briefing kits, or several pages of background information about your story.
- Offer concrete facts and statistics. Back your claims with statistics from reliable sources. Use graphics and charts when they illustrate a point and don't distract the presentation.
- Bring community supporters. Show that a wide range of people are interested in preserving public and affordable housing.
- Bring real people. Editorial board writers appreciate the chance to talk to ordinary people who would be most directly affected by an issue, or who can speak from experience.

Hot Media Tip! For more information on writing op-eds, letters to the editor, press releases, and more, visit the Communications Consortium Media Center website at www.ccmc.org/mediatools.htm. For other media information, visit the “Resources” section of our website.

**Nine Myths and Realities of Public/Low-Income
Housing in New Orleans:
*Reasons to Support Displaced Residents' Right to Return Home***

Opponents of public and affordable housing continue to make inaccurate and misguided arguments calling for everything from the total demolition of public housing stock in New Orleans to changes in housing policy that would negatively affect all low-income residents of the city. Below are nine common public misconceptions followed by the facts.

- 1) *"The storm did irreparable damage to public housing projects like St. Bernard. For this reason they should be demolished."*

Some public housing apartments were damaged by Katrina, but most were not. The developments HUD wants to demolish remain fit for human habitation. Dr. Marty Rowland, a civil engineer who conducted an informal survey of the units in several developments including St. Bernard, has assessed that the vast majority of units are habitable with rewiring and restoration of utilities. Second and third floor units were hardly damaged at all.¹ Reopening the units would allow residents to return and begin the work of cleaning up.

- 2) *"Those [public housing projects] were horrible places to live in before hurricane Katrina. We should all be glad they're gone."*

Life for public housing residents in New Orleans may not have been ideal before hurricane Katrina, but this is no reason to demolish their homes. Destroying public housing and displacing residents will only make their lives more difficult. It will uproot communities, separate families, increase homelessness, and raise unemployment as displaced residents find themselves forced into unfamiliar and hostile surroundings.²

Our first step in addressing the problems that public housing residents face should not be to destroy their homes. Reductions in the total number of affordable housing units is exactly the opposite of what New Orleans needs right now as more than 200,000 citizens remain displaced.

- 3) *"The projects were breeding grounds for poverty, crime, drug abuse."*

Public housing does not create poverty, crime, drug abuse, or any of the other problems affecting residents and their surrounding communities. These problems are much more complex and widespread. The vast majority of public housing residents are law-abiding productive citizens, no different than in other communities. Reducing public housing subsidies, demolishing units, and forcing out residents is simply another example of the overall problem – we are taking too much from the working poor who live there and not giving anything back. Public housing does not breed social ills; they are symptoms of racism and poverty.

- 4) *"Public housing and low-income housing in general were always intended as a crutch, a temporary place for people to live while they get back on their feet, find a job, and a permanent home."*

Public housing was created so that families and persons who cannot afford market rate housing can have a roof over their heads. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development

imposes no time limits on the duration of a family or individual's stay in publicly assisted housing (and never has).³ Public housing was never intended as "temporary assistance." In fact, projects like St. Bernard and Iberville were built because the country recognized that people working entry-level jobs didn't earn enough to support a family. Living in these projects carried no stigma.

By the 1960s public housing was increasingly designed to serve the needs of those 8.2 million families living below the poverty line in the United States.⁴ In New Orleans before hurricane Katrina, there were at least 26,000 poor families and almost 30,000 individuals who were eligible for publicly assisted housing.⁵

Another way of estimating the city's need for better low-income public housing assistance is by gauging the affordability of housing in New Orleans. Before Katrina 36% of families in New Orleans spent more than 35% of their income on housing.⁶ According to HUD, for housing to be deemed affordable a family should have to "pay no more than 30 percent of its annual income on housing."⁷ Since Katrina, the cost of housing has drastically risen, further increasing the percentage of income that families spend on housing. Clearly there is an enormous need for public housing in New Orleans to support those who cannot afford the privilege of living in Uptown, the Marigny, or out in Jefferson. We should not expect time limits to public housing. It is unrealistic and cruel.⁸

- 5) *"High density and concentrated poverty is the problem. If we just reduce the number of units by redeveloping them, spreading them out, and building 'mixed income' or 'mixed use' buildings we can revitalize these communities."*

This statement illustrates what social scientists call a "spatial fetish." A spatial fetish is a theory or belief that claims poverty, crime, delinquency, or other social ills are caused by poor urban planning, residential density and crowding, or general urban environment. It is a fetish because it draws attention away from the real causes of poverty.⁹ It is appealing because it proposes simple solutions that involve mostly the redevelopment of urban space without the need to address issues of racism or social justice.

Social scientists have not demonstrated a causal link between concentrated poverty and increased social problems within specific neighborhoods.¹⁰ There is a correlation, but simply erasing pockets of concentrated poverty by demolishing and redeveloping them does nothing to solve the problem. It does however cause mass displacement of public housing residents in the meantime.

- 6) *"Poor people will have more opportunities to better themselves when they are integrated in mixed income communities."*

This is wishful thinking at best. Many displaced residents experience no positive change in their life chances after their former homes are demolished and redeveloped along these lines.¹¹ Indeed, because redevelopment takes years and 80-90 percent of residents are not allowed to return, many find themselves further dislocated and entrenched in poverty.

The real problems are poverty and racism. Mixed income communities cannot be created by decree. They can only be created once society is more equitable and people have more control over their lives. If we are serious about creating mixed-income communities we will develop affordable and public housing in affluent communities and provide more support and services to poorer areas rather than forcing out residents and redeveloping their homes in the name of some elusive goal.

- 7) *"Public housing and low-income housing programs are government handouts (entitlements) that should be ended. It just perpetuates the cycle of poverty, hopelessness, and irresponsibility amongst the poor."*

Public housing programs are ‘government handouts,’ but so are the enormous middle and upper-class housing subsidies that dwarf HUD’s programs targeting assistance to the poor and working class. In 2006 the federal government will funnel \$136 billion in guaranteed loan commitments to middle and upper-class homebuyers. Compare this to only \$6 billion that will be spent on housing for the elderly, housing for the disabled, AND public housing combined. So who’s getting handouts?

- 8) *“Residents don’t want to come home. They’ll be happier and better off with the opportunity that hurricane Katrina has provided.”*

It’s probably true that some residents are choosing not to return to their previous homes. However, published US guidelines guarantee the right of return for internally displaced people, and many thousands do want to return to their homes in New Orleans. Instead of assuming what residents want, HANO, prospective developers, and civic groups should do everything they can to reach out to public housing residents and listen to their concerns and desires.

- 9) *“HUD has already decided to demolish St. Bernard, C.J. Peete, B.W. Cooper, and the Lafitte projects to build better ‘mixed-income’ communities in their place. People should move on.”*

While HUD’s proposal is unfortunate, it is by no means the final word. Residents are returning and want their homes back. We should support them in their right to return regardless of what HUD has said it intends to do. HUD’s plan for these four developments is virtually the same blueprint it used in the failed River Garden experiment that has not provided adequate housing for former St. Thomas residents.¹² This is a national trend that is pushing tens of thousands of poor citizens out of their homes and demolishing their communities. So called “mixed-income” communities are always built on demolished low-income communities. They typically result in far fewer affordable housing units for those who used to live there and marked increases of homeless families.

¹ Sasser, Bill. “Locking Out New Orleans’ Poor.” Salon.com. June 12, 2006. http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/06/12/nola_housing/index_np.html

² On hostile environment would be St. Tammany Parish whose Sheriff has called displaced Katrina survivors “trash,” and “animals,” and has advocated racial profiling: “if you’re gonna walk the streets of St. Tammany Parish with dreadlocks and chee-wee hairstyles, then you can expect to get a visit from a sheriff’s deputy,” said Sheriff Jack Strain. See – Lewis, Edmund W. “A ‘strain’ on relations.” Louisiana Weekly. July 10, 2006. <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/weekly/news/articlegate.pl?20060710q>, accessed on July 10, 2006.

³ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. “HUD’s Public Housing Program.” <http://www.hud.gov/renting/phprog.cfm>, Accessed on July 8, 2006.

⁴ US Census Bureau. Historical Poverty Tables. “Table 13. Number of Families Below the Poverty Level and Poverty Rate: 1959 to 2004.” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpov13.html>, accessed on July 9, 2006. This figure is for 1960. The overall poverty rate has not changed too much, however.

⁵ US Census Bureau. American Factfinder: New Orleans city, Louisiana. <http://factfinder.census.gov>, accessed on July 8, 2006.

⁶ US Census Bureau. American Factfinder: New Orleans city, Louisiana. “DP-4. Profile of Selected Housing Characteristics: 2000.” <http://factfinder.census.gov>, accessed on July 8, 2006.

⁷ US Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Affordable Housing.” <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/>, accessed on July 8, 2006.

⁸ The suggestion that public housing should become temporary assistance mirrors the discourse that succeeded in dismantling welfare in 1996 and replaced it with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program. While the pre-1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Emergency Assistance (EA) welfare programs were by no means perfect, they were not as harsh on the poor and structurally un/underemployed. By demolishing these entitlement programs and imposing strict time limits and work requirements on recipients of government assistance a drop in the number of recipients was accomplished. However, a concomitant drop in rates of poverty, child poverty, and general hardship has not been achieved. The root causes of poverty remain. Welfare reform accomplished little in terms of empowering the poor to make their lives better while it forced many into the lowest paid ranks of the workforce to the detriment of their children, dependents, and selves (for an authoritative discussion of this see – O’Connor, Alice. Poverty Knowledge: social science, social policy, and the poor in twentieth-century U.S. history. Princeton University Press, c2001.). Public housing in New Orleans should by no means move in this direction.

⁹ Spatial factors are certainly important parts of the problem, but there is no clear line of causality between urban design and urban problems such as spatially fetishistic theories claim. For an authoritative discussion on this issue see – Sayer, Andrew. “The Difference the Space Makes,” in Social Relations and Spatial Structures. Derek Gregory and John Urry (eds.). London: Macmillan, 1985.

¹⁰ For a review of the literature dealing with this problem see – Curley, Alexandra M. “Theories of urban poverty and implications for public housing policy.” Journal of Sociology and Social Policy. June, 2005.

¹¹ Popkin, et. al., HOPE VI Panel Study: Baseline Report and HOPE VI Resident Tracking Study.” The Urban Institute, 2002.

¹² Arena, Jay. “The War At Home: New Orleans, Public Housing, and the ‘Chilean Option’.” ZNET. November 12, 2005. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=9102>. Also see – Bagert, Brod, Jr. “HOPE VI and St. Thomas: Smoke, Mirrors, and Urban Mercantilism.” 2002.