



UNITED STATES SENATOR • ILLINOIS

BARACK OBAMA

PRESS RELEASE



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday, December 18, 2007

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Obama Calls on President to Protect Affordable Housing in New Orleans, Keep Promise to Gulf Coast

*Despite urgent housing needs, Administration intends to
drastically reduce federal housing in New Orleans*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) today sent the following letter to President Bush, calling on him to abandon his Administration's intentions to demolish federally-assisted housing in New Orleans, Louisiana until there is a comprehensive plan to meet the Gulf Coast region's extensive affordable housing needs. Despite an estimated 12,000 people already homeless in New Orleans, and thousands more struggling with costly and slow rebuilding efforts since Hurricane Katrina, 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. Over the past two years, the Bush Administration has consistently failed Gulf Coast residents, and should not further exacerbate this tragic housing crisis by destroying affordable housing.

The text of the letter is below:

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 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