

Blueprint for Gulf Renewal

The Katrina Crisis and a Community Agenda for Action

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2007

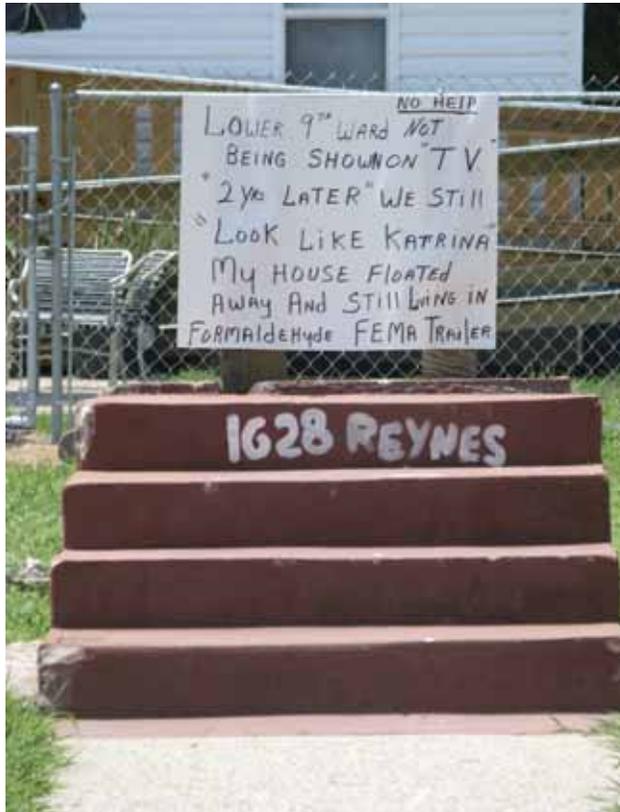


A Special Report by GULF COAST RECONSTRUCTION WATCH
A Project of the INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHERN STUDIES/SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



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Blueprint for Gulf Renewal was written and edited by Chris Kromm and Sue Sturgis of the Institute for Southern Studies. Special thanks to Dagny Isadora Brown, Jeffrey Buchanan, the Kopkind Colony and the over 40 community leaders across the Gulf Coast we consulted for their help in creating this report.

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For further information about this report and post-Katrina recovery in the Gulf Coast, please visit Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, a project of the Institute for Southern Studies: www.southernstudies.org/gulfwatch



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ABOVE PHOTO: *Lower Ninth Ward, August 2007, by Sue Sturgis.*

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“To all who carry a burden of loss, I extend the deepest sympathy of our country. To every person who has served and sacrificed in this emergency, I offer the gratitude of our country. And tonight I also offer this pledge of the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.”

— President George W. Bush in Jackson Square, New Orleans, Sept. 15, 2005

“For our future to be strong, all of our communities must be strong. It says in the Bible that where there is injustice in the world, the poorest people, those with the least power, are injured the most. That was certainly true for the people of Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster compounded by man-made disaster. It is now 18 months past time to get our response right.”

— House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) at the National Press Club on Jan. 22, 2007

“I committed to the people of this part of the world and the Gulf Coast that the federal government would fund recovery and stay committed to the recovery. And one of the reasons I have come down is to hear from you. I fully understand that there are frustrations and I want to know the frustrations. And to the extent we can help, we’ll help.”

— President Bush during a meeting with elected officials and community leaders at Lil’ Dizzy’s Café in New Orleans, March 1, 2007

“I’ve come back to New Orleans, Louisiana, to remind people that the federal government still knows you exist, still knows you have issues, and wants to work with your leadership to address those issues.”

— President Bush during a visit to New Orleans’ Samuel J. Green Charter School on March 1, 2007

“You’re not done grieving, and neither are we. You’re not done cleaning up, and neither are we. You’re not done building, and neither are we . . . I want you all to know that our commitment to you is as genuine as anything we’ve ever undertaken. And we will never relent.”

— House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-S.C.) during an August 2007 visit to the Gulf Coast

“I remain confident that the Gulf Coast can and will achieve a full recovery from the devastating hurricanes of 2005. Advancing that recovery must be a priority to strengthen our nation’s economy and serve the Americans who bore the brunt of these disasters. . . . But, as you know, full recovery will take time and require a strong and continuing commitment from all levels of government.”

— Federal Gulf Coast Rebuilding Coordinator Donald Powell in Aug. 2, 2007 testimony before the House Budget Committee

“We made promises last year and we’ve kept those promises. Today we’re announcing a new partnership for the future after returning to the Gulf Coast and walking your streets, visiting your homes and schools and seeing the challenges you still face.”

— House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) in an Aug. 14, 2007 press statement

INTRODUCTION: Keeping our promise to the Gulf Coast

Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck and floodwaters devastated New Orleans, President Bush declared our country's commitment to a full recovery in the Gulf Coast. "Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives," he promised.

Yet two years after the storms, much of the Gulf Coast and its people still live in devastation. In preparing *Blueprint for Gulf Renewal*, the Institute analyzed reams of government reports, media coverage and statistical indicators. We also interviewed 40 community leaders, from New Orleans to Biloxi, Mississippi, about the challenges they face, and their message to the nation.

The statistics and the voices of Gulf Coast leaders tell the same story: The Katrina recovery is failing. As of mid-August, 60,000 people are still living in "temporary" FEMA trailers because of hold-ups on aid programs and insurance. Schools and hospitals are shuttered, good jobs are scarce and daily threats to health and well-being aren't addressed.

Over 60 percent of those still displaced across the country say they want to come home, but can't—mostly because they can't afford to. Thao Vu of Boat People SOS in Biloxi, Miss., speaks for many when she says, "We are very far from recovery."

After two long years of frustration and hardship, many are running out of time and hope. If there's one message that runs through this report, it's that our country has broken its promise to the people of the Gulf Coast.

When confronted with this reality, many leaders in Washington point to the "big check" that Congress and the President say they have written to fund Katrina relief and recovery—\$116 billion, according to most recent estimates. But as dozens of community leaders asked us: Where did the money go?

For this report, we also conducted an in-depth analysis of the latest data available on federal spending for the Gulf Coast. The findings are eye-opening: Less than a third of that "big check" is slated for long-term rebuilding. The bulk of the money went to short-term emergency relief, which often missed those most in need.

What's more, two years after the storm, less than half of federal funds available for long-term rebuilding have even been spent. And what has been spent has often bypassed the Gulf's most vulnerable communities. As community leaders told us again and again, "The money isn't reaching the people."

Two years after Katrina, our nation has an opportunity to change course and demonstrate our commitment to those being left behind by the failed recovery. This report also offers dozens of practical proposals, drawn from the ground-level experiences of community leaders, for creating a more vibrant, just and healthy future for the Gulf Coast's people.

People and organizations from all parts of society—state and local officials, faith institutions, nonprofit groups, student volunteers—have a role to play in the reconstruction. But in the end, only bold national leadership can ensure a better future for the Gulf Coast. Only Washington has the resources necessary to ensure a prompt, equitable and comprehensive recovery for all.

Two years after Katrina, it's past time for Washington to make good on its promises.

Institute for Southern Studies
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Blueprint for Gulf Renewal: An Action Agenda

In July and August 2007, the Institute for Southern Studies surveyed 40 community leaders across the Gulf Coast about the state of rebuilding what their message is to the nation for an action agenda. The following recommendations reflect the ground-level insights of these leaders about the most critical barriers to recovery. While by no means exhaustive, together they represent a blueprint for a vibrant and just renewal of the Gulf Coast.

1. LAUNCH A BOLD SIX-MONTH AGENDA FOR GULF COAST RECOVERY

The President and leading members of Congress have pledged their commitment to ensuring a full and speedy recovery in the Gulf Coast. In September 2005, President Bush declared, "We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives." In January 2007, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said Congress must step up its efforts: "It is now 18 months past time to get our response right."

Yet two years after the disaster, schools and hospitals across the Gulf Coast are still shuttered, miles of houses and infrastructure are still in shambles, and tens of thousands of people displaced by Katrina are still living in chaos. The Katrina crisis continues—and many in the Gulf Coast are running out of hope.

Gulf Coast leaders say President Bush, Federal Coordinator of Gulf Coast Rebuilding Donald Powell, and the U.S. Congress must live up to their promises, redouble their commitment to rebuilding, and offer the nation a bold, coordinated action plan with clear goals and benchmarks that aims to make whole people and communities that suffered losses in the 2005 storms.

2. BRING PEOPLE HOME

Gulf Coast leaders agree that lack of affordable housing is one of the biggest barriers to recovery. Over 60,000 people are still living in "temporary" trailers, and 31,000 are still receiving Federal Emergency Management Agency housing assistance. Federal officials must ensure that those displaced by Katrina are back in affordable, decent and permanent housing no later than August 2008. They must also guarantee families with children are able to return by supporting quality public education.

- **A REAL Road Home:** Louisiana's Road Home program to assist homeowners has been crippled by delays and mismanagement, and it now faces a shortfall of as much as \$5 billion. Federal lawmakers must step up oversight and identify ways to cut red tape and accelerate closings. They must also ensure programs provide sufficient resources to cover escalating rebuilding costs.

- **Help Renters:** About half of those displaced by Katrina and Rita were renters, and rent costs have jumped as much as 70 percent across the region. However, housing programs have focused largely on homeowners. A bill that's passed the House and a similar measure being considered by the Senate would help speed up the repair and rebuilding of affordable rental units and provide rental assistance. But of the more than 82,000 rental units destroyed by Katrina and Rita, only 33,000 are on track to be rebuilt. The federal government must act immediately to create significantly more affordable rental housing, as well as provide states including Texas and Alabama with funding and tax credits to expand access to housing affordable to the displaced.

- **Save Public Housing:** Even though many New Orleans public housing units suffered little flood damage, federal and local officials have announced plans to tear down four of the city's largest complexes and replace them with mixed-income housing with less room for the poor. Community leaders support a housing recovery bill that's passed the House and would require one-to-one replacement of the 7,000 public housing units in the city pre-Katrina, and there are similar provisions in the measure under consideration by the Senate.

- **Strengthen Schools:** Closed schools and limited resources available for special needs students are preventing many displaced families from returning home. The federal government needs to ensure public education gets the financial support it needs by fully funding school construction needs, special education mandates, alternative and transitional schools.

- **Insurance Reform:** Thousands of homeowners and businesses were denied insurance coverage after the storms. Federal lawmakers should pass legislation currently being considered in the House that would add wind coverage to the national flood insurance program and take other steps to make insurance accessible and affordable to Gulf Coast residents. It should also approve a House plan that would allow states to join forces to create catastrophic insurance pools.

3. CREATE GOOD JOBS TO REBUILD THE GULF

Gulf Coast leaders say another serious barrier to rebuilding is a lack of good jobs. For example, there are 100,000 fewer jobs available in New Orleans today than before the 2005 storms. Immigrant worker advocates report widespread abuse and wage theft by reconstruction contractors, and long-time residents say they've been locked out of recovery work. Washington has a unique

opportunity to create good-paying jobs that will not only directly help working families but also accelerate Gulf Coast rebuilding and revive the regional economy.

- **Launch a Gulf Coast Civic Works Program:** During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration created four million jobs in two months building schools, hospitals, and other vital projects. Under a plan currently being promoted by Gulf Coast leaders and national allies, Washington could create 100,000 public jobs paying \$15 an hour to help residents get back on their feet and rebuild their communities.
- **Protect Workers' Rights:** Recovery workers have faced far too much abuse and fraud by their employers; the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance alone has recovered over \$1 million in stolen wages. At the same time, African-American workers point to a pattern of exclusion from rebuilding jobs. The U.S. Department of Labor must step up efforts to investigate and prosecute workplace abuse and discrimination, and expand opportunity through affirmative action programs.

4. PROTECT THE COAST AND ITS PEOPLE

Gulf Coast leaders say another reason many residents are reluctant to come home is the lack of federal commitment to ensure people are kept out of harm's way.

- **Levees for New Orleans:** The Gulf Coast is in its second hurricane season post-Katrina, but the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has spent only 20 percent of the \$8.4 billion allocated for New Orleans levee repair. A recent analysis found that most city neighborhoods today are at as great a risk of destruction from flooding as they were pre-Katrina. Federal leaders must demand accountability and exercise oversight to ensure the Corps speeds up the provision of storm defenses. In addition, Congress should establish an independent commission to improve Louisiana's flood protection system.
- **A Plan for Coastal Protection:** Wetlands are one of the best defenses against future storms, yet programs for coastal protection and remediation are woefully inadequate. President Bush recently threatened to veto a water resources bill passed by the House that includes \$1.9 billion for coastal wetlands restoration in Louisiana; the price tag for sustainable restoration is estimated at \$14 billion. Washington must swiftly implement a comprehensive program to arrest coastal destruction, as experts say there is only a decade left to act before low-lying communities will be completely lost to rising waters.
- **Protect Public Health:** Gulf Coast residents face a shocking array of health threats. Testing has found dangerous levels of heavy metals and other contaminants, with lead readings in some spots two-thirds higher than what EPA deems safe. Building demolitions released asbestos to the environment, unsafe debris

disposal practices threaten groundwater supplies, and most of FEMA's trailers contained dangerous levels of formaldehyde. Residents complain of respiratory and other physical health problems brought on by the pollution, and many are also struggling with severe psychological trauma and stress.

These problems have been exacerbated by the region's still-hobbled medical system. The federal government must quickly act to ensure health care access, including rebuilding of health care facilities, supporting hospitals and clinics that serve the uninsured, and improving access and funding for mental health services.

In addition, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state regulators must commit to cleaning up neighborhoods where toxic threats have already been found, conduct further testing to ensure community safety, and aggressively address new environmental health threats such as trailer toxins and unsafe hurricane debris dumps.

5. OVERHAUL DISASTER SPENDING AND OVERSIGHT

Gulf Coast leaders express outrage when Washington officials claim to have spent enormous sums of money on hurricane recovery when so little money has gotten to those most in need. Less than 30 percent of Katrina outlays have been for long-term rebuilding—and less than half of that has been spent.

- **Remove Red Tape:** With billions of dollars in hurricane recovery funds still sitting untouched, the White House and Congress must commit to identifying and removing bottlenecks that are preventing resources from reaching those most in need.
- **Contracting Oversight:** An August 2006 Congressional report found that \$8.75 billion worth of contracts for hurricane relief and recovery were tainted by overcharges, wasteful spending or mismanagement. A more recent study found \$2.4 billion in "cost-plus" contracts that have led to huge cost overruns. FEMA must overhaul its contracting practices to expand opportunities for smaller local businesses and to prevent waste, and Congress must heighten oversight of contracting and disaster spending.
- **Reform the Stafford Act:** The Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act requires local and state governments to pay a percentage of the cost of rebuilding projects up front before receiving federal aid. Lawmakers didn't strike the requirement for the Gulf—as was done after 9/11—until May of this year. In addition, the law discourages local governments from building smarter, penalizing them for safety or energy-efficiency improvements. Congress should act on proposals to overhaul the Stafford Act so it better meets the needs of communities recovering from catastrophic disasters.

THE KATRINA INDEX

The State of Recovery by Numbers

August/September 2007

Rebuilding and Recovery

Amount the Bush administration says has been spent on Gulf Coast recovery since 2005 hurricanes: **\$116 billion**

Estimated percent of those funds that are for long-term recovery projects: **30**

Amount of FEMA's 2005 disaster relief budget that was spent on administrative costs: **\$7 billion**

Percent of the 2005 relief budget that represented: **22**

Of \$16.7 billion in Community Development Block Grants earmarked for long-term Gulf Coast rebuilding, percent that had been spent as of August 2007: **30**

Of \$8.4 billion allocated to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for levee repair in Louisiana, percent that had been spent as of July 2007: **20**

Percent of rebuilding costs that Gulf Coast local governments were required to pay up front to receive matching federal funds, due to a Stafford Act provision that Congress has since waived for the region: **25, later reduced by President Bush to 10**

Percent that New York had to pay after 9/11 and Florida after Hurricane Andrew, because the federal government waived the Stafford Act's matching requirement: **0**

Amount of additional money for rebuilding now available since the match requirement was waived in the Gulf Coast: **up to \$1 billion**

As of June 2007, value of controversial "cost plus" Katrina contracts given out by three federal agencies, which allows companies to charge taxpayers for cost overruns and guaranteed profits: **\$2.4 billion**

As of August 2006, value of Gulf Coast contracts that a Congressional study found were "plagued by waste, fraud, abuse or mismanagement": **\$8.75 billion**

Affordable Housing

Scope of post-Katrina rent increases in Louisiana's and Mississippi's most storm-damaged parishes: **200 percent**

Number of rental units available below fair market rents as of August 2007 in Mississippi's Hancock County, Katrina's Ground Zero: **0**

Of the 200,000 homes in Louisiana that suffered major or severe damage from hurricanes Katrina and Rita, number that were rental units: **82,000**

Number of Louisiana's storm-damaged rental units on track for rebuilding under state-administered restoration programs: **33,000**

Of the 5,100 New Orleans public housing units occupied before Katrina, number that are now occupied: **about 1,500**

Number of livable public housing units in the city that HUD has slated for demolition: **3,000**

Number of planned replacement units that would be affordable to previous residents for which there's rebuilding money: **1,000**

Number of hurricane-affected households still living in FEMA trailers: **60,000**

Number of families that have asked to be moved out of their FEMA trailers over concerns that they are toxic: **1,461**

Estimated shortfall in Louisiana's Road Home rebuilding program for homeowners if everyone eligible applied: **\$5 billion**

Economy and Jobs

Number of jobs lost in the New Orleans area since Hurricane Katrina: **118,000**

Percent of stores, malls and restaurants that remain closed in New Orleans: **25**

Value of Gulf Opportunity Zone projects approved to date in Louisiana to stimulate business recovery: **\$4.5 billion**

Number of GO Zone projects located in New Orleans: **1**

Number of luxury condos a developer plans to build with GO Zone tax breaks near the University of Alabama, four hours from the coast: **10**

Months after Katrina struck that the Small Business Administration finished processing loan applications submitted for the storms: **21**

Percent of Katrina contracts that went to Louisiana small businesses as of April 2007, prompting the Department of Homeland Security to pledge an increase in contract awards: **12.5**

Percent that went to Louisiana small businesses four months later: **7.4**

Number of Katrina contracts that federal agencies claimed had gone to Louisiana small businesses, but were later revealed to have gone to big companies or ineligible recipients: **259**

Value of wages the U.S. Labor Department has recovered from Katrina contractors that failed to pay their employees: **\$5.4 million**

Rank of Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" Casino and Resort among largest post-storm private development projects proposed on the Mississippi coast: **1**

Rank of "can't pay for move" among reasons those displaced by Katrina say they aren't coming back to Louisiana: **1**

Coastal Protection and Storm Defenses

Estimated number of years left to restore Louisiana's wetlands before coastal communities are swallowed by the Gulf of Mexico: **10**

Percent of the state's population that lives in coastal parishes: **50**

Distance the Gulf has moved inland since New Orleans' founding: **20 miles**

Distance storm surge must travel over healthy wetlands to be diminished by a foot: **3.4 miles**

Of the \$21 billion water resources bill being considered by Congress and that President Bush threatened to veto over cost, amount devoted to Louisiana coastal wetlands restoration: **\$1.9 billion**

Total estimated cost of a comprehensive program to restore the state's coastal wetlands to a sustainable level: **\$14 billion**

Square miles of protective wetlands destroyed in the New Orleans area by the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet since the Army Corps of Engineers completed it in 1965: **about 100**

Number of those acres set for restoration in the Corps' official plan for closing MR-GO: **0**

Level of storm protection the Army Corps of Engineers is still trying to provide for New Orleans: **100 years**

Level of storm protection that safeguards the Netherlands' port city of Amsterdam: **10,000 years**

Community Health

Number of patients seen on a typical day at D'Iberville Free Clinic, opened in Mississippi's Harrison County after Katrina: **140**

Number of free clinics created post-Katrina that are still operating in Harrison County, but that Mississippi's medical licensing board is considering shutting down over concerns about competition with for-profit doctors: **4**

Percent increase in New Orleans' death rate compared to the two years before Katrina: **47**

Of the seven general hospitals New Orleans had before Katrina, number that are operating at pre-storm levels: **1**

Portion of New Orleans' uninsured that would be helped by the Bush administration's plan to cancel rebuilding of Charity Hospital and instead use federal dollars to buy private insurance for the poor: **less than half**

Number of months that elapsed between EPA's December 2005 announcement that sediment from Katrina's floodwaters wasn't expected to cause health problems and the agency's clarification that that this applied only to "short-term" visits: **8**

Number of Katrina-flooded homes that EPA tested for chemical contamination, as its Science Advisory Board suggested: **0**

While EPA assured New Orleans residents that they were being protected from the risk of demolition-related asbestos inhalation, the number of air monitors the agency installed in the predominantly African-American Lower Ninth Ward, where demolition work has been concentrated: **0**

Months that passed between Sierra Club's May 2006 report documenting dangerously high air levels of formaldehyde—a chemical linked to cancer and depression—in 83 percent of FEMA trailers tested and the agency's decision to temporarily suspend deployment and sales of those trailers: **15**

Factor by which suicide attempts among residents of Louisiana and Mississippi FEMA trailer parks has increased since Hurricane Katrina: **79**

Sources on p. 39-40

WHERE DID THE KATRINA MONEY GO?

Two years after the storms, most hurricane rebuilding funds have yet to be spent—much less reach those most in need

By Jeffrey Buchanan, RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights and
Chris Kromm, Institute for Southern Studies

When pressed on the slow pace of recovery in the Gulf Coast, President Bush insists the federal government has fulfilled its promise to rebuild the region. The proof, he says, is in the big check the federal government signed to underwrite the recovery—allegedly more than \$116 billion.

But residents of the still-devastated Gulf Coast are left wondering whether the check bounced.

“\$116 billion is not a useful number,” says Stanley Czerwinski of the Government Accountability Office, Congress’s investigative arm.

For starters, most federal money—about two-thirds—was quickly spent for short-term needs like debris removal and Coast Guard rescue.¹ As Czerwinski explains, “There is a significant difference between responding to an emergency and rebuilding post-disaster.”

That has left little money for long-term Gulf Coast recovery projects. Although it’s tricky to decipher federal reports on Katrina spending, our best estimate of agency data is that only \$35 billion has been appropriated for long-term rebuilding—a fraction of the figure cited by the White House.

Even more shocking: as families and communities remain in limbo two years after the storms, more than half of the money set aside for rebuilding hasn’t even been spent, much less gotten to those most in need. For example:

* Washington set aside \$16.7 billion for Community Development Block Grants, one of the two biggest sources of rebuilding funds, especially for housing. But as of March 2007, only \$1 billion—just 6 percent—had been spent, almost all of it in Mississippi. Following bad publicity, the Department of Housing and Urban Development spent another \$3.8 billion on the program between March and July, leaving 70 percent of the funds still unused.²

"Our best estimate is that only \$35 billion has been appropriated for long-term rebuilding—a fraction of the figure cited by the White House for Gulf Coast recovery."

* The other major source of rebuilding help was supposed to be the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Public Assistance Program. But of the \$8.2 billion earmarked, only \$3.4 billion was meant for non-emergency projects like fixing up schools and hospitals.³

* Louisiana officials recently testified that FEMA has also “low-balled” project costs, underestimating the true expenses by a factor of four or five. For example, for 11 Louisiana rebuilding projects, the lowest bids came to \$5.5 million—but FEMA approved only \$1.9 million.⁴

* After the failure of federal levees flooded 80 percent of New Orleans, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers received \$8.4 billion to restore storm defenses. But as of July 2007, less than 20 percent of the funds have been spent, even as the Corps admits that levee repair won’t be completed until as late as 2011.⁵

"Even more shocking, less than half of the rebuilding money has actually been spent."

The fact that most federal rebuilding funds remain bottled up in bureaucracy is especially astounding considering that the amounts Washington allocated come nowhere near the anticipated costs of making the Gulf whole again.

For example, the \$3.4 billion FEMA has available to rebuild local public infrastructure would cover only about one-eighth of the damage suffered in Louisiana alone. But this money is spread across five states—Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas—and covers damage from three 2005 hurricanes, Katrina, Rita and Wilma.⁶

To its credit, Congress has acted on some of the money hold-ups. It struck a requirement in the Stafford Act that mandates local governments pay a percentage of rebuilding projects up front before receiving federal aid. The Bush administration reduced the law’s 25 percent match requirement to 10 percent post-Katrina—but it refused to waive the rule entirely, as it did for New York after 9/11, and Florida after Hurricane Andrew. The requirement grounded countless projects across the region, but was particularly devastating in places like Mississippi’s Hancock County, where towns lost most of their tax base and could not come up with matching funds.

Meanwhile, some in Washington blame state and local governments: The money’s there, they say, but the locals just aren’t using it. And it’s true that there have been problems below the federal level. For example, Louisiana’s “Road Home” program—created by Congress but run by Virginia-based private contractor ICF International for the state—has been so poorly managed that 18 months after the storms only 630 homeowners had received checks.⁷ Closings have sped up since then, but administrators admit



Lower Ninth Ward, August 2007. Shortfalls, delays and mismanagement of federal programs have kept money from flowing to home rebuilding and other Gulf Coast recovery efforts.

Photo: Sue Sturgis

"The \$3.4 billion FEMA has available to rebuild local infrastructure covers about one-eighth of the damage suffered in Louisiana alone."

many won't see money until 2008—or maybe at all, since the program is facing a projected \$5 billion shortfall.

But in the end, launching a recovery after a disaster of Katrina's scope is a federal responsibility; only Washington has the resources and coordination needed to ensure a complete reconstruction. State and local governments' shortcomings aside, the White House and Congress have not adequately overseen federally-funded programs, much less stepped in to remove red tape and make sure taxpayer money gets to those who need it the most.

This is especially true when it comes to tax breaks and rebuilding contracts. Included in the oft-cited \$116 billion spending figure is \$3.5 billion in tax credits to jump-start business in Gulf Opportunity or "GO" Zones across 91 parishes and counties in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. But many of the breaks have been of questionable benefit to Katrina survivors. Take for instance the \$1 million deal to build 10 luxury condos next to the University of Alabama football stadium—four hours from the Gulf Coast.⁸

Federal contracts for rebuilding and recovery have also been marked by scandal, fraud and abuse. One of the leading watchdogs on this issue has been Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), whose office released a study in August 2006 that identified 19 Katrina-related contracts worth \$8.75 billion that experienced "significant overcharges, wasteful spending or mismanagement."⁹

For thousands of Gulf residents, the end result is that federal support for recovery after Katrina's devastation has been insufficient, too slow and hasn't gotten to those most in need.

"As of March 2007—18 months after Katrina—only 6 percent of Community Development Block Grants had been spent, most of it in Mississippi."

"Where did it go?" demands Tanya Harris of ACORN, a community group in New Orleans, when asked about the \$116 billion. "Tell me. Where did it go?"

Jeffrey Buchanan is communications officer with the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights. Chris Kromm is executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies.

'The federal government owes the city of New Orleans'

Beth Butler and Tanya Harris of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), New Orleans



Tanya Harris, ACORN organizer

Photo: ACORN

How to create 100,000 good-paying jobs

Good jobs are hard to find on the Gulf Coast, and the lack of decent work is keeping many residents from getting back on their feet. But a growing chorus of Gulf leaders thinks Washington could swiftly tackle the problem, if they'd only look to a successful chapter in U.S. history.

During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration created four million public works jobs in two months. The "WPA army" built or fixed up 2,500 hospitals, 6,000 schools, 13,000 playgrounds; they even planted three billion trees.

Today, Gulf activists are calling for a similar Gulf Coast Civic Works Program that would give residents good-paying jobs to revive their communities.

"The WPA rebuilt our country in the 1930s," says Dr. Scott Myers-Lipton, a professor at San Jose State University in California and advocate of a modern-day Gulf WPA. "A similar program can rebuild the Gulf Coast today." Myers-Lipton estimates it would take only \$3.9 billion—half the monthly cost of the Iraq war—to put 100,000 people to work at jobs paying \$15 an hour.

It would be the ultimate win-win: Gulf residents would get stable jobs, decent pay and training in needed skills. Businesses would benefit from new workers and new money pumped into the economy. It would also jump-start stalled infrastructure rebuilding projects needed to revive the Gulf.

In New Orleans, community and faith groups like ACORN, All Congregations Together and the Jeremiah Project are actively pushing for the Gulf Civic Works Program. Presidential candidates John Edwards and Sen. Barack Obama have tentatively endorsed the plan.

But the program has gotten little traction in Washington, where lawmakers have opted to outsource the recovery to private contractors and a maze of fragmented agencies.

"Thousands of Katrina survivors have been waiting to return home and shape the future of their communities," says James Rucker of ColorOfChange.org, a national e-advocacy group. "Finally, a plan exists to make this happen. But it won't happen without public pressure."

New Orleans is a central hub of ACORN, a national group organizing low- and moderate-income families. We spoke with two of ACORN's leaders in Louisiana at the group's office in New Orleans.

Like many in New Orleans, Beth Butler—ACORN's Southern regional director—believes the federal government's responsibility for Katrina's destruction starts with the failed levees. Improperly built and maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the system allowed 80 percent of the city to flood, causing most of the problems in New Orleans that linger to this day.

"Our flooding was from the failed levees—federally-designed levees," Butler says. "The federal government owes the city. New Orleans should be completely restored with federal funding."

But funding has yet to reach many New Orleans residents. Tanya Harris, ACORN's lead organizer in New Orleans, spells out what she sees in city neighborhoods: "People can't move forward because they don't have money," she observes. "You ask people about return, but they can't plan their return unless they have money to fix their homes."

BARRIERS TO HOUSING

"Housing is the most serious roadblock," echoes Butler. The cost of rent in many New Orleans' neighborhoods has more than doubled, thousands of public housing units are slated for demolition, and Louisiana's Road Home program designed to help homeowners has been plagued by mismanagement and delays.

When we talked with Butler and Harris, the deadline for applying for Road Home money had just passed—and ACORN says many were locked out. Dozens of families contacted ACORN to report technical glitches when applying online. ACORN asked the state to give applicants an extension, but it was denied.

Confusing applications kept out others. "You have elderly people who had no idea how to do it," Harris says. "You had people who didn't even realize they were eligible. We tried to encourage people to apply, but then they get stopped."

JOB, HEALTH CARE AND LEEVES

A lack of good-paying work is another big factor holding back the New Orleans recovery. “We have to have a way for teenagers to get living-wage jobs,” says Butler. “That’s why a Gulf Coast Civic Works Program makes so much sense,” she adds, referring to growing calls for a Works Progress Administration-style effort to hire 100,000 Gulf residents to rebuild their communities.

ACORN believes a Gulf Civic Works initiative would not only provide sorely-needed jobs and rebuilding muscle; it would also fill a long-term need for skills training—a “tremendous asset” for returning residents, says Harris.

Money also needs to be pumped into the city’s health care system, made fragile after the closing of Charity Hospital, which served the city’s uninsured low-income and working-class residents. “We need Charity restored,” says Butler. “We want our clinics restored around the city, and more clinics would be great.”

And then there are the federally managed levees, the last line of defense against future storms. Butler points to new maps recently published by the Army Corps of Engineers

“We have to have a way for teenagers to get living-wage jobs. That’s why a Gulf Coast Civic Works Program makes so much sense.”

revealing that despite two years of levee repair, most neighborhoods are just as vulnerable to a hurricane of Katrina’s strength as before.

“The only place where you can see a difference [in the protection from rebuilt levees] is Lakeview, one of the whitest areas of the city,” says Butler. “It’s just astonishing.”

Harris nods in agreement, adding, “It’s very blatant.” She points out that at the repaired Monticello Canal levee, there’s a higher wall on the side of Jefferson Parish, which is largely white, but lower on the Orleans Parish side, which is majority black.

“It looks like they’re planning to flood us again,” Butler wryly concludes.

Bringing human rights home

Nathalie Walker and Monique Harden of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, New Orleans

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights is a nonprofit, public-interest law firm that provides legal services, community organizing support, and education to defend the human right to a healthy environment and to protect the human rights of internally displaced Gulf Coast hurricane survivors. We spoke with the group’s co-directors in their offices in New Orleans.

When we arrive at the headquarters of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, a limping Nathalie Walker greets us. Three days earlier, the public interest attorney and co-director of Advocates had injured one of her knees while jogging, and the swelling was so severe it was visible through her pants leg.

She had called an orthopedist for an appointment—and was told she would have to wait two months.

Many in New Orleans face similar barriers to health care—and Walker is one of the lucky ones with insurance. The closing of Louisiana State University’s Charity Hospital, a teaching facility that served the working poor and uninsured, has put health care out of reach for many in the city, where the death rate has risen 47 percent since Katrina. ¹



Nathalie Walker (left) and Monique Harden (right), co-directors

Photo: Chris Kromm

Meanwhile, the state’s efforts to reopen Charity have been stymied by the Bush administration and U.S. Sen. David Vitter (R-La.), who delayed approval of federal funding for the project while pushing an alternative plan to buy private insurance for the poor—a plan that would cover less than half of those in need.² To get the hospital underway, Louisiana—already cash-strapped before the storms—has been forced to spend its own funds.

Not all levees are created equal

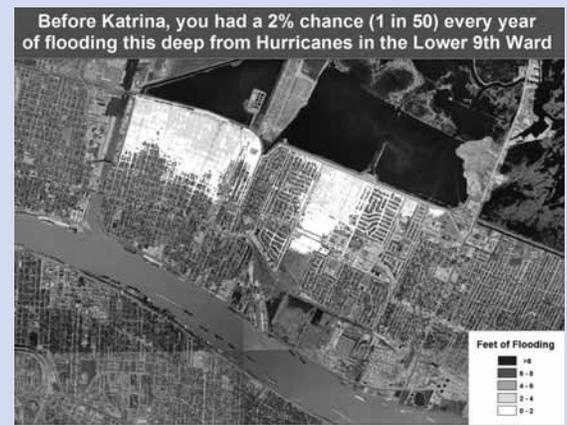
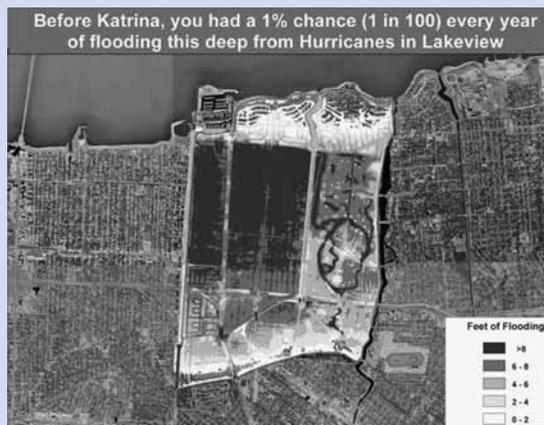
After levee failures in Katrina's wake devastated New Orleans, the Army Corps of Engineers was appropriated over \$8 billion to shore up the city's protections. To date, only about \$1 billion of this has been spent, leaving New Orleans without a protective system that can withstand a 100-year storm—let alone a more powerful storm like Katrina that's expected to come along once every 400 years.

In June of this year, the Corps released new flood elevation maps showing the difference its work has made in neighborhoods across the city. The maps show a significantly reduced flood risk—five feet less water in a 100-year storm—for Lakeview, an upscale white community near Lake Pontchartrain that suffered catastrophic levee breaches post-Katrina.

But in neighborhoods east of Lakeview including middle-class Gentilly and the predominantly black, working-class Lower Ninth Ward, there has been only a very slight risk reduction—one that in most places is measured in inches rather than feet.

The Corps says it will take at least four more years to complete the upgrades needed to protect the entire city against a 100-year storm. And the price tag for the project keeps rising. After originally estimating the cost at about \$7 billion, the Corps now says the work could require twice that much.

Meanwhile, a growing number of citizen groups and political leaders are pressing for an independent commission to examine Louisiana's flood protection system and make recommendations for improving it. For more information, visit www.levees.org/commission.



Maps: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, July 2007

"People are now relying on health clinics that volunteer nurses have opened," Walker says. "That's really all they have."

DISASTER VULTURES

Walker and her co-director, Monique Harden, connect what's happening to health care in New Orleans with a broader problem facing the region's reconstruction: the domination of the recovery agenda by powerful private interests.

"One of the key things that's got to change is the privatization scheme that's been brought to the recovery efforts," Walker says. "It's serving nobody well but the disaster vultures."

By way of example, Walker points to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's closing of public housing across the city and developers' plans to build "mixed-income" communities that offer fewer spaces for the poor. In July, a settlement was reached in a federal lawsuit that charged the HUD-run Housing Authority of

New Orleans with giving its own employees rent-subsidized apartments in a mixed-income development while the poor were shut out. U.S. District Court Judge Peter Beer's ruling blasted HUD and HANO for their "scorn and incompetence" and for playing "bureaucratic games."³

"They want to turn that land into other things, including golf courses," says Harden. "At the same time, rents are skyrocketing, which means some people are profiting off of others' inability to return."

PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO RETURN

After Katrina, Advocates worked with the Natural Resources Defense Council to test sediment from the flood, in some places finding dangerously high levels of toxins including lead and arsenic. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency didn't argue with the results, but insisted the pollution presented no public health threat. In June, the Government Accountability Office released a report faulting EPA's response to post-Katrina pollution, noting that the agency for eight months told the public there would

be no adverse health effects from sediment exposure—but neglected to say that applied only to short-term visits.⁴

"No matter what you present them with, they find a way to say it's not a problem," says Walker, who likened the situation to the federal government's cover-up of toxic threats after 9/11.

For Walker and Harden, the most pressing issue facing New Orleans and the entire Gulf region is getting displaced people back home to decent conditions. They believe that the Stafford Act—the federal law governing disaster response—violates basic human rights by failing to adequately protect displaced people's right to return.

To fix that, they're calling for a federal law guaranteeing the right to return based on the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

"This country pays attention to human rights elsewhere around the globe," Walker says. "It's time to bring that home."

'People are far away from recovery'

Thao Vu of Boat People SOS, Biloxi, Miss.

Boat People SOS was formed in the late 1970s to help Vietnamese immigrants navigate social services in the U.S. Since Katrina, the nonprofit has helped many of the 30,000 ethnic Vietnamese living along the U.S. Gulf Coast connect with needed government assistance and advocate for a just rebuilding.

Before Katrina, about 10,000 ethnic Vietnamese people made their homes along the Mississippi coast. Most lived in East Biloxi and worked in the shrimp industry—the men on shrimping boats, the women in shrimp-processing factories. Other community members operated small businesses like motels and restaurants. Most were homeowners.

"When the hurricane struck, it devastated East Biloxi," says Thao Vu, a lead case manager with the Biloxi office of Boat People SOS. "Hundreds of homes were destroyed."

In fact, the storm's 30-foot surge had destroyed about 3,500 of Biloxi's homes—60 percent of the city's housing.¹ It also hit public housing hard. With nowhere else to go, some families stayed in wrecked homes. Some moved in with friends or family. "It was not uncommon to see a house with 15 or 20 people living under one roof," Vu recalls.

Those appalling conditions dragged on into winter, when families finally started receiving FEMA trailers. But two years after the storm, many of those families remain in trailers.

"People are very far away from recovery," says Vu.



Thao Vu, case manager

Photo: Dagny Brown

HOUSING AID SLOW IN COMING

A big barrier to rebuilding, Vu says, is insurance companies. After Katrina, some insurers sought to avoid paying homeowner claims, declaring that most of the damage was due not to wind, but to flooding. That meant only those homeowners who carried separate flood insurance—less than half of those who suffered storm damage—would get payouts.² Insurance companies faced lawsuits from various parties, including Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood.

"Many of our clients got only very little of what they were supposed to," Vu says.

Her clients also experienced problems with the state's

A coastal coalition for recovery

When the state of Mississippi initially proposed its federally funded assistance program for Katrina-affected homeowners in flood zones, it planned to offer grants of \$50,000—only one-third of what it had made available to homeowners who lived outside flood zones.

That didn't sit right with Thao Vu of Boat People SOS, a national organization that works in Biloxi's Vietnamese community.

First of all, many people who lived inside the flood zones didn't know it, because FEMA's maps were out of date when the hurricane hit. In addition, Vu felt it didn't make sense to give more money to people outside the flood zone, since they probably suffered less damage.

"It was inequitable," she says.

In response, Boat People SOS joined with other members of the Steps Coalition to

successfully press Gov. Haley Barbour and the Mississippi Development Authority to double the grant amounts to \$100,000.

A 40-member, multi-ethnic alliance of advocacy, social service and faith-based organizations, the Steps Coalition was formed in June 2006 to promote a just recovery in south Mississippi. It focuses on affordable housing, economic justice, environmental justice, human rights and preservation of historic communities.

If the dark cloud of Katrina had a silver lining, for Vu it was the Steps Coalition, on whose board she now serves. At a time when people feel isolated and powerless in the face of daunting challenges, Vu says the coalition has helped bridge differences and allowed all those affected to speak in one voice—and be heard in the halls of power.

"We all face the same challenges post-Katrina," Vu says. "To influence policy you need to become one voice. It takes a collective effort."

federally funded homeowner grant program administered through the Mississippi Development Authority. The program was divided into two phases; the first was for people who lived outside the flood zone and offered a maximum grant of \$150,000. Phase II, launched in December 2006, is for homeowners who lived inside the flood zone and provides a maximum payout of \$100,000. The application process was time-consuming and difficult for many people, especially those not fluent in English. Vu knows people who are still waiting for checks.

Rebuilding is more expensive than before the storm, with the price of labor and supplies soaring with demand. Elevating a house for future storm protection can cost as much as \$30,000. In addition, Biloxi has adopted new building codes since Katrina, which also adds to the cost of reconstruction.

At the same time, homeowners' insurance is difficult to get and more expensive—in many cases costing 90 percent more now than before the storm, reports Vu. And it's hard to find reputable contractors.

"Greater oversight of the construction industry would be helpful," Vu says.

OLD JOBS BLOWN AWAY

Employment is another pressing concern. Immediately after Katrina and into the following spring, many in Vu's community were forced to live on unemployment benefits. Thousands of people lost their jobs in the storm, and new ones were slow in coming.

The Bush administration's Gulf Opportunity Zone program offered generous tax breaks to help get Mississippi's casinos and other businesses back on their feet, but rebuilding large enterprises took time. For example, Biloxi's waterfront Beau Rivage Resort and Casino oper-

ated by MGM Mirage didn't re-open until the storm's first anniversary.

Meanwhile, many of the Vietnamese shrimpers had lost their boats, and the government provided them with no financial assistance to repair them or buy new ones. Boat People SOS stepped into the gap, offering some aid to rebuild shrimping businesses. This was especially important since shrimpers' skills are not easily transferable to casinos and other work settings, says Vu.

HEALTH CARE ACCESS HURTING

Vu also sees many in her community struggling to access health care. Many of the local doctors and nurses were forced to leave the area after the storm because their homes and offices were damaged. While several free medical clinics were set up in Harrison County post-Katrina, there's now a push to close them over concerns that they're taking business away from for-profit health care providers.³

"Some doctors don't like the clinics being here, but they're helping people without insurance," Vu says. She points out that many shrimpers and other small-business owners in her community are among those without coverage.

In an effort to address her community's pressing health needs since Katrina, Vu's office launched the Health Awareness Program for Immigrants, which encourages women to get Pap smears and mammograms. The staff helps low-income women set up appointments, accompanies them to the exam, and provides translation services.

Given the many needs of her community, Vu says it's imperative that the federal government takes immediate action to help.

"I'm a realist—I know things are going to take a long time," she says. "But there are things that can be done now."

Rebuilding for all

Bishop James Black and Sandra Taylor of the Center for Environmental and Economic Justice, Biloxi, Miss.

Based in Biloxi, Miss., the Center for Environmental and Economic Justice is a community group—"as grassroots as you can get"—that is still struggling to meet the needs of its members after Katrina. We talked with two of CEEJ's leaders at their headquarters in Biloxi's Faith Tabernacle of Praise church.

For Bishop James Black and Sandra Taylor, it's no mystery why so many of the people they know can't get back into their homes: Living on the Mississippi coast has become a lot more expensive post-Katrina.

"We need less politics, less paperwork and less red tape."

"People are trying to rebuild," says Taylor, program director for the Center for Environmental and Economic Justice, a grassroots group based in Biloxi, Miss. "But the cost of stuff is going so high." While families have struggled to pick up the pieces, land and insurance prices have skyrocketed.

On top of that, new post-Katrina construction rules have added even more costs to rebuilding. The rules are especially hard on those who can least afford the additional cost, like low-income residents living in the older homes of East Biloxi, which are more expensive to bring up to code. "We do want to build back smarter, but it can be a hindrance," says Taylor.

Two years after Katrina and Rita, many church members are still in FEMA trailers deciphering the maze of new housing rules and scrambling to find the funds to meet them. "We need less politics, less paperwork, and less red tape," says Taylor.

FILLING A VACUUM

Soon after the storms, Black and Taylor's church swung into action, delivering aid: clothing, water, baby supplies. A production line of volunteers assembled boxes of supplies and delivered them to people who couldn't make it to the Red Cross center, since that organization "wasn't present" in many areas, they report.



Sandra Taylor, program director and Bishop James Black, executive director

Photo: Chris Kromm

Despite the toxic hazards present in coastal communities, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has not launched any widespread effort to test for and clean up storm-related chemical contamination.

Delivering emergency supplies wasn't the only time the Center was forced to fill a vacuum created when FEMA, the Red Cross and other agencies tasked with relief and recovery were slow to respond. For example, when building cleanup and construction lagged, the Center teamed up with Dillard University in New Orleans (and funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences) to train 25 Biloxi residents in basic construction and cleaning out hazards like lead, asbestos and mold—major post-storm health risks.

A Mississippi miracle?

In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour won plaudits for his ability to attract federal relief and recovery funds. *Governing* magazine picked Barbour as its “2006 Public Official of the Year.” Billy Hewes III, a Republican official from Gulfport, Miss., declared of the governor, “He is to Katrina what Rudy Giuliani was to 9/11.”

There’s no doubt that Barbour—a Republican with close ties to the Bush administration—was adept at lobbying Washington for Katrina dollars. In fact, Mississippi’s success in attracting a disproportionate share of funds provoked a firestorm of outrage in Louisiana, where the 2005 hurricanes caused a much higher proportion of damages.

Take housing, for instance. Even though 75 percent of homes damaged by the storms were in Louisiana, Mississippi received 70 percent of the funds for the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Alternative Housing Pilot Program. Mississippi was slated to get 38 percent of federal hospital recovery funds, even though it lost just 79 lost beds compared to 2,600 lost in southern Louisiana, which was targeted to get 45 percent of the funds.¹

But just because money is getting steered to Mississippi hasn’t necessarily meant it’s reached those most in need. “Washington has been very good to us in terms of the money allocated,” says Bishop James Black, a Gulfport community leader. “But once the dollars are obligated, it’s hard to get it into people’s hands.”

That difficulty is felt up and down the Mississippi coast. Hancock County—the place where Katrina’s eye made landfall—was one of three Gulf Coast areas recently singled out as having “severe problems” by the Rockefeller Institute on Government and the Louisiana Public Affairs Research Council.² The Institute declared that the towns of Waveland and Bay St. Louis are flat-out “struggling to survive.”

And for some Mississippi communities, future prospects are even bleaker, largely because of enormous debts the towns ran up covering emergency expenses. Though President Bush recently signed into law a measure allowing FEMA to forgive the federal portion of that debt, Barbour has refused to do likewise. Over \$79 million in loans will come due this October, causing coastal leaders to contemplate the heretofore unimaginable.³

“One thing you continually hear from officials from FEMA to the state level is that—and they love this phrase—they’ve never seen a city go under because of a natural disaster,” Waveland mayor Tommy Longo says. “But there have been so many firsts in Katrina.”

Black and Taylor have also battled with regulators to take post-Katrina environmental threats seriously. Originally formed in 1989 in response to concerns that Agent Orange and others toxins were seeping into water supplies from nearby military bases, the Center has raised concerns that the storm’s floodwaters churned up toxic chemicals. Indeed, officials have acknowledged that Katrina pushed dioxin-contaminated soil into areas near Gulfport’s Seabee naval base, sending the Navy scrambling to contain the pollution.⁴

Despite the toxic hazards present in coastal communities, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has not launched any widespread effort to test for and clean up storm-related chemical contamination or the lead paint that’s being released during demolitions and renovations.

“The EPA has been absent for us,” says Black. “We are coming up short in funding, with money going to other geographic areas for lead and other cleanup monies.”

AN EQUITABLE RECONSTRUCTION

The skyrocketing construction costs on the Mississippi coast have effectively created a two-tier recovery. Those who can afford to rebuild, do. But those who can’t are being left behind, and they include homeowners, renters and small-business owners.

“On the beach you see very little progress other than casinos, and that’s largely because of insurance [costs],” says Black.

But cutting the red tape, cleaning up the coast and ensuring that rebuilding is equitable won’t happen unless people nationally understand how places like Biloxi are still suffering from the aftermath of Katrina.

“People think everything’s alright and back to normal here,” says Black. “The national press is not giving due acknowledgment to the suffering and difficulties.”



House in Biloxi, Miss.

Photo: Courtesy of Common Ground

‘Women have a voice’

Sharon Hanshaw of Coastal Women for Change, Biloxi Miss.

Coastal Women for Change is a multi-racial grassroots group aimed at helping women in Biloxi participate in community planning and rebuilding efforts. We met with Executive Director Sharon Hanshaw in a downtown coffeehouse where she paused for a break during a hectic workday.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, Coastal Women for Change Executive Director Sharon Hanshaw is still living in a FEMA trailer—and she believes her health is hurting because of it.

Hanshaw suffers from a raspy cough she’s developed since moving in, and she knows other trailer dwellers who have gone to the hospital repeatedly for similar respiratory problems. Independent testing by the Sierra Club found that more than 95 percent of FEMA trailers tested in Mississippi had dangerous levels of formaldehyde, which has been linked to respiratory problems, cancer, headaches, fatigue and depression.¹

Many of the trailers are also infested with mold, compounding health problems and forcing cash-strapped families to continuously replace ruined items.

However bad it is, moving out isn’t an option—at least not for many displaced Biloxi residents with low-paying jobs in the city’s tourist-oriented service economy.

“How can you live on \$7 an hour when housing is more expensive?” asks Hanshaw, who says that home and apartment costs have doubled since the storm. “People are working two jobs just to survive.”

That’s one reason Coastal Women and other members of the Steps Coalition (*see page 14*) are calling for long-term solutions to post-Katrina housing problems, including a demand that all displaced persons be moved out of FEMA trailers and into apartments or houses by August 2008.

“If you’re going to do housing, do housing,” Hanshaw says. “Stop with the transitional solutions.”

LOOKING OUT FOR THE VULNERABLE

As natural disasters usually do, Hurricane Katrina took a disproportionate toll on people who were already socially vulnerable—children, the elderly, and women. Coastal Women was created to ensure that their needs and concerns are addressed in the rebuilding.

A lack of quality childcare has been a major problem facing Biloxi and many other communities after Katrina. There were more than 3,000 licensed childcare centers



Sharon Hanshaw, executive director, and her niece

Photo: Dagny Brown

in Hurricane Katrina’s path², and the storm also displaced many home-based providers.

After members voiced concern about childcare—and lack of action by lawmakers—Coastal Women launched its own childcare program, opening several in-home daycare centers throughout Harrison County. It also trained new childcare providers, filling a shortage of skilled employees and also providing valuable job training.

“Women are the backbone of everything. I want to let women know they have a voice.”

In addition, Coastal Women has worked to address the needs of the elderly, who often face social isolation that leaves them susceptible to robbery and abuse. Filling a gap among government agencies, the group has worked with local police to step up patrols in neighborhoods and has distributed storm preparedness kits to help seniors keep track of their emergency contact information, evacuation options, and prescriptions.

Is there still no evacuation plan?

Two years after failed evacuation plans left thousands in harm's way during Hurricane Katrina, many coastal areas still don't have a solid strategy for getting people safely out if a dangerous storm approaches.

Before Katrina hit, New Orleans had no plans in place to help those unable to evacuate themselves—including the 27 percent of the city's households that did not own cars.¹ Though officials had hundreds of municipal and school buses available, they did not use them. And residents without cars are disproportionately people of color: A recent study found that only 7 percent of white households lack access to a car compared to 24 percent of black households and 17 percent of Latino households.² Many of those residents were forced to either ride out the storm at home or flee to the disastrously managed shelter at the city's Superdome.

Since Katrina, though, New Orleans has announced there will no longer be any shelters of last resort in the city when a mandatory evacuation order is issued, which will happen whenever a Category 3 or higher storm threatens. Instead, the Office of Emergency Preparedness has instituted a City Assisted Evacuation Plan to help residents who can't evacuate themselves. Regional Transit Authority buses will pick up evacuees at various locations and bring them to processing centers, where state and federal authorities will have them bused to shelters elsewhere.³ Amtrak trains will be used to transport the frail elderly.⁴

But that approach raises another worry: trying to coordinate with federal authorities.

As this report went to press, the Bush administration still had not released its revised National Response Plan for handling disasters—a document that was supposed to be completed June 1. Meanwhile, state and local emergency officials have been criticizing the White House and Homeland Security for shutting them out of the process. Some have even charged the feds with using the plan to shift the onus for disaster response to state and local governments in order to avoid blame should things go awry.⁵

At a hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee held in late July, lawmakers—including members of the President's own party—expressed concern that lines of authority in the plans are not clear. Local officials feel the plans are vague and that they can't get quick answers from FEMA. Meanwhile, FEMA officials acknowledged they have yet to nail down the logistics on getting help into disaster zones.⁶

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) sponsored the SMART RESPONSE Act now under consideration in the Senate that among other things directs FEMA to coordinate state and local evacuation plans and creates a National Sheltering Database. "We need coordinated evacuation plans at the regional level so that the next time a disaster strikes, be it natural or manmade, we can evacuate people quickly, efficiently and safely," Landrieu says.

Given the lingering uncertainty over official evacuation efforts, nongovernmental organizations are offering to step in. Operation Brother's Keeper—an Atlanta-based nonprofit that provides transportation in the event of a disaster—is training churches and community groups to execute their own evacuation strategy.

Evacuation isn't just a problem in New Orleans. For example, in Biloxi, Miss. city officials have compiled a list of people who need public transportation to evacuate—but it's still unclear where they'll be evacuating to, reports Sharon Hanshaw of Coastal Women for Change.

Hanshaw's group is filling other gaps in the official response system. Coastal Women has been distributing kits to help the elderly keep track of important papers in case of an evacuation, as well as creating a computerized database to help them reunite with family members in the event of a storm—and they're doing it all on a bare-bones budget and a program mostly carried out by volunteers.

"We need—we crave—help," says Hanshaw.

'WOMEN ARE THE BACKBONE'

Coastal Women for Change is first and foremost devoted to serving and empowering Biloxi's women—black, white, Asian and Latina. Since the storm, the group has been especially focused on ensuring women have a voice in shaping local rebuilding plans.

"If you're going to do housing, do housing—stop with the transitional solutions."

After the group was formed in January 2006, one of its first events was a community forum in Biloxi to which it invited the major, city councilors and city planners. The forum drew 200 community members who got answers to pressing questions on rebuilding requirements, housing programs, and schools.

Members of Coastal Women also won five seats on subcommittees of the mayor's planning commission, where they will be able to help shape key decisions about coastal recovery.

"Women are the backbone of everything," Hanshaw says. "I want to let women know they have a voice, and they have choices."



Biloxi, Miss.

Photo: Courtesy of Common Ground

'You're putting together a situation that creates a disaster'

Gina Womack and Damekia Morgan, Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, New Orleans

Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children is a statewide membership organization that works to create a better life for Louisiana's youth—especially those who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. We met with Executive Director Gina Womack and Organizer Damekia Morgan in the New Orleans office their group shares with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana.

Louisiana residents have faced a host of difficulties in trying to reconstruct their lives since Katrina. But among the members of Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children there was consensus about the most pressing issue of all: rebuilding better public schools—especially in New Orleans.

The Crescent City's education system was in serious trouble even before the hurricane, which damaged 80 percent of its school buildings and scattered employees and students across the country. In the three years leading up to the storm, there were 24 indictments against public school employees. The system was unable to account for more than \$70 million in federal funds. More than two-thirds of eighth graders lacked proficiency in English and math. Children even had to carry their own toilet paper to school because the bathrooms had none.¹

"What are we coming home to? The schools are still dilapidated."

In 2003, the state created a Recovery School District to take over underperforming schools; it controlled five New Orleans schools when the time the storm struck. But in after Katrina, the Louisiana legislature passed a law that placed 22 New Orleans schools in the RSD. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in the state capital of Baton Rouge oversees those schools, with the other half-dozen or so of the city's public schools still run by the New Orleans School District.

In the storm's wake, the RSD was ill prepared to handle the number of students that returned to the city. In January of this year, the RSD placed about 300 students on wait-



Damekia Morgan, New Orleans organizer and advocate (left) and Gina Womack, co-director
Photo: Chris Kromm

ing lists because the schools had no room for them, sparking civil-rights lawsuits. There were also concerns that students were being expelled by the system to address overcrowding, as expulsion rates shot up six-fold after the storm.²

Serious troubles remain today, with RSD leaders warning recently that 11 schools undergoing renovation might not be ready by fall. While FEMA has made hundreds of millions of assistance grant dollars available to repair and build new schools in the city, RSD until recently lacked the staff needed to draw up the plans necessary to obtain financing.³

In the lock-down atmosphere, elementary-age schoolchildren had to pass through metal detectors on their way to class.

"What are we coming home to?" asks FFLIC Organizer Damekia Morgan. "The schools are still dilapidated."

A new direction for New Orleans schools

One of the thorniest issues facing the reconstruction of New Orleans has been how to rebuild the public schools.

When Katrina hit, the city's education system was already facing major problems. Two months after the storm, the Louisiana legislature voted to take over the city's failing schools. The state-administered Recovery School District then turned many of the schools into charters—publicly funded institutions that are tuition-free and governed by a nonprofit board. However, the board may choose to hire a for-profit corporation to manage the school, blurring the line between public and private.

Nevertheless, some public-education advocates have embraced charters. They include Aesha Rasheed of the New Orleans Network, a nonprofit formed after the storm to help displaced residents communicate and organize.

"In some cases, charter schools are the most democratic option," Rasheed says, noting that they have allowed parents to band together and open schools in neighborhoods that otherwise would not have had any. "Every school that reopens in New Orleans is creating increased capacity for students to come home." And that's critical in a city where earlier this year the public schools had to place 300 students on waiting lists, sparking lawsuits.

But others take a less hopeful view of the charter trend. Among them is Bill Quigley, a professor at Loyola Law School in New Orleans. In a recent article, he argued that the push for charters is essentially created a two-tier education system, with charters and private schools getting resources that are not available to traditional public schools.¹

Soon after the storm, for example, New Orleans' charter schools received more than \$20 million in extra funds from the Bush administration, which was not similarly generous to traditional public schools. Meanwhile, the Laura Bush Foundation has contributed tens of thousands of dollars to rebuild libraries at 13 schools in New Orleans—eight of them charters, five private, but no traditional public schools.²

Another concern is that while charters are required to have open enrollment policies, some have found ways to exclude certain children, such as those with special-education needs. That has left cash-strapped traditional schools with the difficult task of educating the most troubled students.

Heightening public school advocates' concerns about

"We will be taking a more community-minded approach to school safety."

the direction of the city's education system is the Recovery School District's recent decision to hire as its new superintendent Paul Vallas, who promoted greater private involvement in public schools when he held similar positions in Chicago and Philadelphia.

Indeed, while addressing a recent meeting of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, Vallas vowed to push to get more private companies involved in sponsoring schools. Lockheed Martin and Microsoft, he reported, are among those who've expressed an interest.

"We are looking for models that you will instantly know are quality schools," he said.

SECURITY OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Upon arriving in New Orleans, Vallas also faced controversy of another sort: an out-of-state security contract that had ballooned in the last school year from \$4.4 million to \$20 million. Under the deal with The Guidry Group of Texas, the RSD had one security guard for every 37 students—a rate nine times that of the pre-Katrina New Orleans public school system. The RSD was spending \$465 per student on security, up from just \$45 per student before the storm.³ To ease concerns over what many saw as a bid to turn the city's schools into prisons, Vallas wants to try a new way of improving security.

"We will be taking a more community-minded approach to school safety," Vallas announced recently. "We want to bring in community and faith-based groups that understand the unique challenges our children are facing—and we want them to recruit parents and community members to serve as hallway monitors, truant officers, crossing guards and lunchroom aides."⁴

Though Vallas intends to renew The Guidry's Group contract, he also plans to hire an in-house security chief to oversee the deal and control costs. At the same time, he is seeking proposals for mentoring programs, after school programs and Saturday extra-curricular activities to help change the educational climate. Vallas introduced similar initiatives in Philadelphia and Chicago.

Some groups that were critical of the bloated security contract are hopeful that Vallas' fresh approach might help avoid some of the problems that arose because of the prison-like atmosphere in the city's public schools.

"Vallas has a lot of interesting proposals," says Damekia Morgan, a New Orleans-based organizer with Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, which protested the security contract and has been pressing instead for more mental health services, recreational programs and tutoring rather than guards.

For instance, Vallas plans to limit high school size to 600 students and classroom size at all schools to no more than 20. He wants to provide all high school students with a laptop computer loaded with instructional materials. He intends to do away with disciplinary expulsion, instead using after-school and Saturday detention. Elementary schools will have extended days with enrichment programs, and students will be given a boxed meal to take home.

"The other day we had children break into one of our schools," Vallas reported. "They were looking for something to eat."

FROM SCHOOLS TO PRISONS

Another big problem facing New Orleans' public schools has been a lack of qualified teachers. Immediately after Katrina, the school system fired some 4,000 experienced teachers—including Morgan. They got no advance notice, and many learned about their firing through news reports. The school system now wants to test teachers before re-hiring them.

"I was quite resentful and didn't want to come back," says Morgan. Instead, she came to work for FFLIC, starting in September 2006.

FFLIC and other public education advocates have also been highly critical of RSD's security contract, holding a rally in July calling for school authorities to scrap the deal, which increased fivefold in the course of the last school year. FFLIC's members protested that the schools were being turned into prisons.

The lock-down atmosphere extended even into the system's lowest grades: Since the storm, some schools have combined elementary and middle school students, and that meant that some elementary-age schoolchildren had to pass through metal detectors on their way to class.

“There’s nothing in place to support students or teachers—no mental health services. You’re putting a situation together that creates a disaster.”

“People’s minds have been conditioned to believe that whenever something happens we need more security guards and more police to keep us safe,” says Morgan. “But that tends to instigate problems rather than helping the situation.”

Newly hired RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas has also been critical of the security contract and has plans to revamp the way New Orleans schools ensure a safe environment (see “A new direction for New Orleans schools,” page 20).

EMPHASIZING SECURITY OVER SERVICES

The emphasis on security in the schools has come at the expense of other much-needed services, FFLIC leaders say. It also reflects a broader problem: the militarization of the city since the storm.

Though the National Guard continues to patrol New Orleans’ streets today, the city’s murder rate is still soaring. From the start of 2007 to early August, there were 117 murders in the city, most of them involving young black men killing other young black men.

But putting so much money on security—both on New Orleans’ streets and in its schools—does little to address the underlying conditions that lead to violence. Those conditions include a lack of good jobs, affordable housing and health care.

“There’s nothing in place to support students or teachers—no mental health services,” says FFLIC Executive Director Gina Womack. “You’re putting a situation together that creates a disaster.”

Bringing back the bayou

Pam Dashiell, Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, New Orleans

Holy Cross Neighborhood Association is a grassroots group working to preserve and improve a historic community in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward. We attended a recent association meeting, where residents heard a report on the group’s post-Katrina environmental restoration efforts.

The historic Holy Cross neighborhood in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward sits on relatively high ground along the Mississippi, a few miles east of the French Quarter. The river levee here withstood the force of Hurricane Katrina, but the neighborhood—along with the entire Lower Ninth—was inundated when floodwalls on the Industrial Canal breaches along the ward’s western flank breached.

Today, much of the the New Orleans area east of the canal still looks like a war zone with countless blocks of boarded-up homes, overgrown lots and missing street signs.

But it’s a very different scene in Holy Cross, thanks in large part to the work of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association. A group active in community improvement before Katrina, the association has played a key role since the storm in preserving and reviving the neighborhood.



Pam Dashiell, Holy Cross Neighborhood Association immediate past president

Photo: Chris Kromm

Though early city recovery plans called for parts of Holy Cross to be bulldozed and turned into green space, Holy Cross fought for and won the right to rebuild. Now the group is working to transform the community into green space of another sort: a more environmentally sustainable neighborhood.

As part of that effort, a group of graduate students from the University of Wisconsin at Madison spent the summer of 2007 in Holy Cross studying the ecology of nearby Bayou Bienvenue. An urban wetland stretching from the Lower Ninth's northern edge 30 miles east to Lake Borgne, the bayou as recently as 50 years ago was a thriving cypress swamp where local residents fished and hunted ducks.

“Coastal restoration is environmental justice. We deserve protection.”

But when the Army Corps of Engineers cut the shipping channel known as the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet through the bayou in the 1960s, saltwater poured in, killing most of the cypress and severely wounding the local ecology. That pattern has been repeated throughout coastal Louisiana over the decades, resulting in the loss of one-third of the region's land and leaving low-lying communities vulnerable to storms.

The federal government has been slow to address the problem and reluctant to spend the money that sustainable restoration will take in Louisiana—an estimated \$14 billion. But with help from the Wisconsin students and others, Holy Cross is working to restore the bayou in its own backyard.

“Coastal restoration is just environmental justice,” says longtime Holy Cross resident and Association activist Pam Dashiell. “We deserve protection, and that’s the best way to do it.”



Photo: Courtesy of Common Ground

REBUILDING SMARTER

After the storm, Holy Cross residents crafted a sustainable recovery blueprint for their neighborhood with help from organizations including the U.S. Department of Energy, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research and the Sierra Club, along with a team of architects and energy experts experienced in post-disaster planning.

That work led to the opening this year of the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development. Located in an office at the rear of the Greater Little Zion Church in Holy Cross, the Center serves as an information and materials clearinghouse to help local residents rebuild their homes to be more storm-resistant and energy-efficient—especially important given that post-storm New Orleans has some of the nation's highest residential power rates.

The neighborhood's efforts have caught the attention of others. New Orleans recovery czar Ed Blakely recently announced plans to invest \$145 million in public money over the next five years in eastern New Orleans and the Lower Ninth, including Holy Cross. The national non-profit Global Green USA, with financial support from actor and New Orleans resident Brad Pitt, recently began construction on a development of affordable and energy-efficient homes on the Holy Cross riverfront, with displaced residents getting first dibs. And this fall, the community's Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology plans to open an interactive playground to educate children about the wetlands.

Meanwhile, the Center is working on creating an Environmental Restoration Center to get more scientists like the Wisconsin students involved in helping the bayou—and by extension the community.

“If destruction of the bayou occurred in 20 years, it's not unreasonable to think that in 20 years we can make it go the other way,” says Wisconsin student Andy Baker, who presented the students' preliminary findings at a recent Holy Cross association meeting.

AGAINST THE ODDS, A REASON FOR HOPE

While surveying the bayou, the Wisconsin team made an amazing discovery: a live cypress. They found the tree growing near a pump station and estimate it's between 20 and 30 years old. They named it Betsy.

To the students, Betsy represents the hope that where one cypress grows, others might, too. One way to encourage this, they suggested, would be to pour treated sewage wastewater into the bayou. The nitrogen and other nutrients would stimulate the growth of plants and trees that in turn would eventually help reclaim terra firma from rising waters.

But, Baker warns, it's no sure thing. "Ecological restoration of the area is possible, but not guaranteed," he says.

Indeed, Holy Cross and the larger Ninth still face a number of serious environmental threats. Though the Corps has pledged to close MR-GO, exactly how and when that will take place—and whether it will involve any restoration of wetlands—is not yet clear. Meanwhile, the agency still has plans to dredge in the Industrial Canal, even though that project is the target of a lawsuit filed by the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association and environmental groups concerned it will stir up toxic sediments and further pollute the area.

At the same time, the state Department of Transportation and Development intends to start building a new

four-lane bridge along the edge of the bayou next spring, a project the Association opposes. And there are plans underway to place another landfill in the bayou—even though an old landfill there has proven so toxic it's being considered for the federal Superfund program.

Despite the problems, Holy Cross residents and their allies continue to push on with their bayou restoration plan. Dashiell was deeply inspired by a recent trip she took with other Gulf Coast activists to tsunami-affected communities in Southeast Asia.

"One thing about the Thais and Indians is they almost worship their wetlands," she says. "They're considered sacred. That's what really brought it home for me."

'You can't do policy for dead people'

Marylee Orr and Paul Orr, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Baton Rouge, La.

With more than 100 organizational and several thousand individual members, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network is dedicated to making the state a safer, healthier place to live. We met with Executive Director Marylee Orr and her son Paul Orr, the group's communication director, at a roadside restaurant near Baton Rouge as they were returning from filing a notice with ExxonMobil for alleged violations of the Clean Air Act.

Created in 1986, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network is a public policy organization that works to protect the state's environment and public health. To that end, the group has organized educational campaigns to raise environmental awareness. It has lobbied lawmakers to support earth-friendly legislation. It has filed lawsuits to force regulators to take action and polluters to clean up.

But Katrina added a new role to LEAN's portfolio: humanitarian relief provider.

Witnessing the Gulf Coast's overwhelming crisis of need after the storm and the government's failure to respond effectively, LEAN revamped its mission to become a supplier of the most basic human needs, collecting and distributing food and water, medical goods, baby supplies, toiletries, and cleaning supplies to hard-hit communities. The group even opened its Baton Rouge offices to the displaced, housing about a dozen people for several months.

"We felt completely abandoned by the government," says LEAN Executive Director Marylee Orr, who grew up in New Orleans with a father who kept a hatchet at his bedside in case the floodwaters rose while they slept and he had



With help from LEAN, members of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East organized against the opening of an unlined debris landfill in their community after Katrina, eventually leading to its closure.

Photo: Craig Morse

to hack through the roof. “When LEAN is the first group to bring food and water into communities, the system has failed.”

But what else was there to do?

Says Orr, “You can’t do policy for dead people.”

Is the EPA misleading Gulf residents?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has come under fire for falsely assuring New York City residents and recovery workers that the air was safe to breathe after the 9/11 disaster. In fact, demolition of the three World Trade Center buildings released to the environment numerous toxic materials, causing various health problems among those exposed.

It turns out the EPA also made false assurances to Gulf Coast residents in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

That was the finding of a June 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office, the watchdog arm of Congress.¹ For example, the GAO found that while EPA told Gulf Coast residents their health was protected from the risks associated with asbestos inhalation, it failed to deploy air monitors in and around New Orleans neighborhoods—including predominantly African-American communities like the Ninth Ward—where demolition and renovation activities have been concentrated.

The GAO also criticized information the EPA offered to the public on post-Katrina environmental health risks, saying it was unclear and inconsistent on how to protect against exposure to some contaminants, particularly asbestos and mold. Three key reports on EPA’s environmental sampling in New Orleans suffered from a lack of timeliness and insufficient disclosures.

“For example, EPA did not state until August 2006 that its December 2005 report—which said that the great majority of the data showed that adverse health effects would not be expected from exposure to sediments from previously flooded areas—applied to short-term visits, such as to view damage to homes,” the report stated. “In addition, the summaries do not disclose an important EPA assumption—that the results of sediment samples from streets and other outdoor public access areas can be extrapolated to private properties, such as yards and the inside of homes. This is important because, for example, environmental contamination levels inside buildings can be significantly higher than and different from the contamination outside, potentially causing more adverse health effects.”

The EPA also failed to promptly remove clearly visible chemical drums from several federal wildlife refuges in Louisiana, leading to a costlier cleanup, which is not yet completed. The agency also lacked an effective role in emergency debris disposal decisions that could lead to pollution, the report found. Finally, the lack of clarity in federal debris management plans impeded the safe disposal of some appliances and electronic waste.

The GAO has called on the EPA to implement an asbestos monitoring plan in New Orleans, improve its future communications to the public on disaster-related environmental risks, and take action to minimize those risks. It also recommended that EPA work with the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Coast Guard and federal land management agencies to address environmental contamination of federal lands in future disasters.

PROTECTING PEOPLE WHEN THE GOVERNMENT FAILS

LEAN staff soon discovered another pressing need among residents, workers and volunteers in storm-stricken communities, where floodwaters had deposited sediments contaminated with chemicals and germs. It first dawned on Paul Orr, LEAN’s communication director and Marylee’s son, about a month after Katrina when he made his way into New Orleans after parts of the city were reopened to the public.

“Driving down Canal Street, the only people I saw were Hispanics cleaning out hotels,” Paul says. “They were wearing no protective equipment.”

In response, LEAN and other groups called on the federal government to safeguard working conditions during cleanup and to urge Congress against relaxing environmental protections. They cautioned the against following the path taken after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when agencies failed to adequately protect recovery workers from toxic hazards. LEAN also collected sediment samples for independent testing, documenting contamination by heavy metals, petroleum and other industrial chemicals at dangerously high levels in some residential areas.

“We felt completely abandoned by the government”

Unfortunately, the federal government wasn’t any more aggressive in protecting people on the Gulf Coast than in New York, the Orrs report. The Environmental Protection Agency was slow to offer information on potential toxic hazards from the storm, and some of the information it released was misleading (*see accompanying article, this page*). The government also failed to clean up the widespread contamination or create a registry of people exposed to track health effects—“because they will happen,” says Marylee.

Neither did the government distribute protective equipment, so LEAN stepped into the gap. The EPA eventually gave the group an emergency grant to assist its efforts, but that took a year to arrive. In the meantime, the group relied on donations from members, church groups and humanitarian organizations.

To date, LEAN has handed out more than \$200,000 worth of respirators, disposable suits and other gear to people helping with the rebuilding effort. In fact, it’s still distributing protection today, as the recovery in some neighborhoods like New Orleans’ devastated Lower Ninth Ward is just getting underway.

“It scares me to think if we hadn’t had the resources to help them what would have happened,” says Marylee.

TARGETING TOXIC DEBRIS DUMPS

LEAN also continued its policy work after the storm, drawing attention to debris disposal problems. Before Katrina, the U.S. disaster that left behind the greatest recorded amount of debris was 1992's Hurricane Andrew, which generated 43 million cubic yards of trash in Florida; Katrina in comparison left behind an estimated 100 million cubic yards.¹

"We as a country have never handled that kind of waste before," says Marylee. "They started putting it in landfills located in wetlands. We've created a toxic legacy."

LEAN and the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit in federal court in August 2006, charging that Louisiana allowed storm debris landfills to operate in violation of federal environmental regulations. In addition, LEAN helped in the successful fight led by Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East to close an unlined debris dump near an ethnic Viet-

namese community, and the group has targeted the illegal dumping that's been happening in New Orleans, testifying about the problem before a Senate committee in April.²

LEAN has also been promoting a comprehensive environmental policy agenda in Katrina's wake. Besides protecting workers from post-storm hazards, it includes closure of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, which exacerbates storms' impact on New Orleans; a moratorium on cutting coastal forests and development permits in wetlands; adding environmental expertise to the Louisiana Recovery Authority; and developing an economic argument for coastal restoration.

LEAN realizes it won't be an easy task, though.

"Louisiana has always been very heavily influenced by corporate interests," says Paul. "Politicians are not listening to the people."

'Start telling the truth'

Victoria Cintra of the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance, Biloxi, Miss.

The Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance is a coalition of organizations formed in 2000 to press for fair immigration policies and to help individual immigrants seek redress of grievances. Since Hurricane Katrina, MIRA's work has focused on the abuse and exploitation of immigrant workers in the Gulf Coast's reconstruction. We met with MIRA organizer Victoria Cintra at her Gulfport church.

Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour recently said he doesn't know what his state would have done after Hurricane Katrina without immigrant labor, since foreign workers have been so critical to the reconstruction effort. About 30,000 immigrants flocked to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, with the majority of them undocumented. Many recent immigrants work in low-skill demolition and construction jobs such as laying bricks, preparing concrete forms and rough carpentry.

But despite the important role they play in the Gulf's rebuilding, immigrants too often face exploitation by their employers—and a lack of protection by federal authorities.

"It was like the government said, 'Open the gates and let the immigrants in, but we're not going to look after them,'" says MIRA Organizer Victoria Cintra.

One major problem since the storm has been companies' failure to pay immigrant employees for their work. That's spurred Cintra to take direct action such as holding pickets in front of casinos and employers' homes



Victoria Cintra

Photo: Diane Greene Lent
Courtesy of Ms. Foundation

and calling in the TV cameras. MIRA's bold tactics have succeeded in recovering more than \$1 million in unpaid wages for immigrant workers.

"We had to shame people into doing what they were supposed to do," Cintra says. "That's a shame."

STEPPING IN WHERE FEDS REFUSE TO TREAD

MIRA has been stuck doing the job of federal enforcers because the U.S. Department of Labor was largely absent from the Gulf Coast after the storm.

For example, DOL's Occupational Safety and Health Administration—the lead agency charged with protecting workers after disasters—sent only one employee from its federal office to cover all of Mississippi, Louisiana

and Alabama. The agency did not finalize arrangements for a telephone-accessible translation service until late August of last year, and it still does not have any bilingual compliance officers assigned to the Baton Rouge area office on a permanent basis.¹

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has taken actions that effectively discourage immigrant workers from filing workplace complaints. In one instance that sparked objections from federal lawmakers and union leaders, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers posed as OSHA workers in a sting designed to nab illegal immigrants.² But at the same time, DOL and OSHA have shown little interest in using similar tactics against abusive employers.

"DOL should have undercover people going in and seeing how things work and busting people," Cintra says. "They're not doing that."

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT IMMIGRANTS

At the same time, immigrants are also facing the same

problems as native-born residents, like a lack of affordable housing, environmental pollution, and limited access to health care.

When talking about health care, it disturbs Cintra to hear politicians and pundits constantly railing against immigrants getting free medical treatment.

She told the story of a young immigrant worker she knows who was the victim of a home-invasion robbery and shot twice in the foot. Doctors at the big local hospital removed one bullet but said they lacked the resources to treat the other wound, sending him instead to a smaller hospital. The doctors there told him to wait a week for the inflammation to go down, but within a few days gangrene began setting in.

He returned to the hospital—but the doctors there told him they'd provide the necessary surgery only if he paid \$18,000 up front.

"For people to say immigrants are getting free medical care is a fallacy," Cintra says. "There are a lot of things that need to be done, but the biggest is to start telling the truth."

'People would be appalled if they knew'

Colette Pichon Battle, founder of Moving Forward Gulf Coast and Gulf Coast advocate for Oxfam America, Slidell, La.



Colette Pichon Battle, founder and president

Photo: Courtesy of Moving Forward Gulf Coast

Created in response to Hurricane Katrina, Moving Forward Gulf Coast, Inc. is a Louisiana-based nonprofit that provides resources and training to help residents rebuild strong communities. We spoke with founder Colette Pichon Battle by phone from her home in Louisiana.

In August 2005, Colette Pichon Battle saw her family in Slidell, La.—including aunts, uncles and her 62-year-old mother—flee when six feet of floodwater washed into their homes.

Today, she watches with frustration as her people struggle to come back. Most of them haven't returned, she says, because aid has come too little and too late.

"We're not millionaires, we're middle-class folks," says Pichon Battle. "But just going through this 'Road Home' process is moving people to tears," she adds, referring to Louisiana's troubled program aimed at helping homeowners. Her mother is still displaced in Texas two years after Katrina.

And then there's the red tape. The staff of Moving Forward Gulf Coast, the organization Pichon Battle launched after the storm (she now sits on the group's board of directors), often finds itself helping residents navigate a confusing array of programs that are rarely coordinated.

"Imagine, you're an elderly lady who's already filled out paperwork for FEMA, already filled out paperwork for emergency medical assistance, and now you need to fill out another form for the Louisiana Recovery Authority," Pichon Battle explains. If they make a mistake, the appeal could take months. "People are falling like ducks because the paperwork is so arduous."

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

To top it all off, Pichon Battle says, Washington now wants to take some of its money back.

Moving Forward's latest battle is over FEMA "recoupment," the agency's attempt to reclaim nearly \$410 million worth of relief checks they now say went to people who shouldn't have received aid.¹

Of the thousands of letters FEMA has mailed demanding repayment, officials readily admit that many are going to people who made honest mistakes filling out their paperwork, or who couldn't decipher the agency's confusing rules.

Sometimes, federal record keeping is to blame: In one case, FEMA sought the recoupment of more than \$10,000 in rental assistance from a poverty-stricken Katrina survivor. In reality, this person had never applied for or received any rental assistance, which FEMA admitted during the appeals process.²

But that hasn't stopped FEMA from aggressively demanding that money be returned—usually in jargon-laden letters that offer little by way of explanation, says Pichon Battle.

Even worse, targets of recoupment often aren't told they have the right to appeal—a confusing process that even Pichon Battle, a practicing attorney, says she needed special training to navigate. "How can regular people win these cases?" she wonders. "The answer is, they can't."

Once they lose appeal, aid recipients have to pay immediately; FEMA begins charging interest on the "loan" within months.

"FEMA is sending out letters saying, 'You know that \$2,000 we gave you in 2005? Now you have to pay it back,'" she says. "In 60 days they have to set up a payment plan, in 90 days it's a federal default." Moving Forward has helped elderly residents who were told their Social Security checks would be garnished if they didn't comply.

In June 2007, federal judge Helen Berrigan ordered FEMA to immediately cease many recoupment efforts, denouncing its notification letters for their "incomprehensible hieroglyphic abbreviations" and decrying the lack of an appeals process as a violation of due process

Critical condition: The Gulf health care crisis

FEMA trailers laced with formaldehyde. Neighborhoods exposed to toxins, lead and asbestos. Thousands of city residents grappling with mental health issues from stress to chronic depression.

Put these and other public health threats together, and in the Gulf Coast you have a prescription for disaster, says Colette Pichon Battle of Moving Forward Gulf Coast in Slidell, La. Making the situation worse: a still-devastated health system that leaves many across the region without the care they need.

Federal and state officials have been slow to rebuild the Gulf's tattered medical facilities, including Charity Hospital in New Orleans, a teaching hospital with a mandate to serve low-income and under-insured patients.

There are plans underway to replace the facility with a medical center run jointly by the state and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, but it won't admit patients until late 2012 at the earliest. Meanwhile, those plans have sparked opposition from some federal leaders, who are pushing for a more decentralized approach to care.

"They're trying to replace Charity with smaller health clinics," Pichon Battle says. "But medical professionals of the city are gone. One thing that could bring them back is a large hospital, or a teaching hospital." The New Orleans health department lost 60 percent of its staff after Katrina, and the Louisiana Board of Nursing reported a 27 percent drop in licenses a year after the storms.¹

The loss of Charity has also dealt a blow to New Orleans' ability to handle a surging mental health crisis. According to a recent government study led by Ronald Kessler of Harvard Medical School, over a third of Katrina survivors show signs of "severe" or "moderate" mental illness. The percent of those who say they've considered suicide has doubled in the last year.²

Children—over 25,000 of whom are still living in FEMA trailers—are having the hardest time. Half of the parents surveyed in coastal Mississippi say their children have developed emotional or behavioral problems since Katrina.³

But mental health resources remain scarce: Today there are only 32 psychiatric beds available to children and adolescents in all of New Orleans.⁴

"People are going crazy," Pichon Battle says. "Charity Hospital had a mental health floor, but now there are no facilities for people in the African-American community, Vietnamese community, the new Latino community."

"People need help, but there's nowhere for them to go," she concludes. "Every day, we're just watching people break down."

rights. Judge Berrigan further encouraged FEMA to "return to their original mandate of alleviating suffering and focus its substantial powers on continuing to help those entitled to relief."³

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, was even more blunt, telling FEMA that "their incompetence should be one of the mitigating factors as they pursue this money."⁴

"Here the federal government failed the people, by not protecting the people of New Orleans—and now they want to talk about fraud?" asks an incredulous Pichon Battle. "People would be appalled if they knew the government would do that to people who have been victimized several times over."

'The money's not going to the people'

Banita Rogers, New Orleans Survivor Council, and Julie Andrews, Residents of Public Housing, New Orleans



Residents at the reoccupation of St. Bernard public housing on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2007.

Photo: Common Ground Collective

Created out of the concern that the post-Katrina agenda was being set by the socially privileged, the New Orleans Survivor Council unites poor and working-class African Americans to plan and direct the rebuilding of their communities. It also organized Residents of Public Housing, which is pressing for the reopening of shuttered complexes across the city. We spoke with organizers Banita Rogers of the Survivor Council and Julie Andrews of Residents of Public Housing by phone from New Orleans.

Ask Banita Rogers, administrative director of the New Orleans Survivor Council, what she sees as the biggest problem facing the post-Katrina recovery, and her answer is simple: Money to help people rebuild their lives.

For one thing, there's simply not enough being spent to make storm survivors whole again. She points out that Louisiana's Road Home rebuilding program provides homeowners a maximum grant of \$150,000.

But that's not enough in a region where the cost of construction materials and labor has skyrocketed since the disaster. When the insurance companies and Road Home money hasn't come through, those of greater means have fallen back on retirement money or other savings. That's not an option for the working-class and poor residents

of New Orleans, especially in areas like the Lower Ninth Ward where the Survivor Council is based. They have been largely bypassed by federal recovery money.

"They say how much money has been spent," says Rogers, "but it's not going to the people."

NEIGHBORS, GOOD AND BAD

The Survivor Council has turned to creative strategies to ensure the city's poor and working-class African Americans are not abandoned in the reconstruction.

In response to New Orleans' Good Neighbor policy, which allows officials to seize property from homeowners if they haven't been able to gut their house or clear overgrown yards, Council volunteers have stepped in to help those residents who are still displaced or who are too elderly or disabled to do the work themselves.

"Folk desperately want to return to New Orleans, but they can't—even though there are available livable housing units."

They've also organized a "Bad Neighbor" commission that documents instances where the federal, state and local government have failed to maintain their own properties to minimum standards.

In additions, The group is also directly challenging plans by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Authority of New Orleans to demolish four shuttered public housing complexes that were home to about 3,000 residents before Katrina. The buildings suffered relatively minor damage in the flooding, but the agencies want to turn over the properties to private developers to build mixed-income communities that will offer fewer spaces for the poor. A federal lawsuit challenging the decision is set to go to trial in November.¹

In response, the Council organized those in public housing to form a group, Residents of Public Housing, to ensure their voice is heard—and to re-open the doors of shuttered complexes.

“Folk desperately want to return to New Orleans, but they can’t—even though there are available livable housing units,” says Julie Andrews, an organizer with the group.

A SPIRIT OF SOLIDARITY

The Survivor Council has also brought a strong international perspective to their activism in New Orleans.

Earlier this year, representatives of the group traveled to Venezuela to meet with organizers of that country’s Communal Councils, grassroots neighborhood groups that aim to address common concerns and funnel government money to needed programs.² The Council has asked the Venezuelans for help in building Survivor Councils among the 200,000 New Orleanians who are still displaced.

They’ve also organized a “Bad Neighbor” commission that documents instances where the federal, state and local government have failed to maintain their own properties to minimum standards.

The Council is bringing that same spirit of solidarity to New Orleans. Earlier this year when 17 Latino immigrant day laborers were arrested in the suburb of Gretna, the largely African-American Survival Council bailed them out of jail. In gratitude, the men—part of the Day Laborers’ Congress—formed a volunteer crew to repair the storm-wrecked house of 87-year-old Council member Ora Green, who had \$4,000 stolen from her by a contractor who didn’t complete promised work.

The Council would like to see the U.S. government display some solidarity with its own citizens.

“You can make another country whole?” Rogers asks, referring to the U.S. reconstruction effort in Iraq. “We are the Americans—put us first.”

Can public housing be saved in New Orleans?

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, there were about 5,100 mostly African-American families living in the city’s public housing complexes. Though many of the sturdily built brick units suffered only relatively minor damage, only about 1,300 units have been reoccupied to date.

That’s because the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Authority of New Orleans—which was placed under HUD control before the storm due to chronic mismanagement—are pushing ahead with plans to tear down four of the city’s largest complexes, with about 3,000 units.

In their place, the agencies want to build privately developed, mixed-income communities that would ultimately provide fewer spaces for the poor—a serious concern in a city where rents have increased about 35 percent since the disaster.¹

But HUD’s and HANO’s teardown plans are facing determined resistance.

After the storms, families in public housing came back to find the facilities cleared by police, surrounded by barbed wire and locked with steel plates secured over doors and windows to keep people out. Residents swung into action, holding protests and organizing groups like Residents of Public Housing, which demanded their right to return.

“Our mission is to do for ourselves what the government won’t,” the group said in a recent letter to supporters.²

In June 2006, a federal lawsuit was filed over the proposed razing by the Washington-based Advancement Project, a civil-rights advocacy group; Bill Quigley of the Loyola Law Clinic in New Orleans; attorney Tracie Washington, who’s now president and CEO of the Louisiana Justice Institute; and the national law firm of Jenner & Block. The suit accuses the agencies of violating residents’ civil rights and seeks to halt the demolitions. A federal judge has set a November trial date.

“This lawsuit is about who has a right to return to New Orleans, and who is valued in the rebuilding process,” Advancement Project Co-Director Judith Browne-Dianis said at the time of the filing. “We won’t stop until every single public housing family that wants to come home has an opportunity to do so.”

Meanwhile, Congress has also joined the fight. U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) earlier this year shepherded through the House a measure—the Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act of 2007 (H.R. 1227)—that requires one-to-one replacement of all of the 7,000 public housing units that were in the city prior to Katrina.

On the Senate side, Sens. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) have submitted their own version of the legislation—the Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act (S. 1668)—that blocks immediate demolition of public housing and requires the rebuilding of the 5,100 units occupied before the storm.

Landrieu’s and Dodd’s bill would also effectively take control of HANO away from HUD—a move that would give local officials greater say over public housing redevelopment. In addition, it authorizes funds to cover the shortfall in the state’s Road Home program for homeowners and boosts affordable housing. The Senate is expected to take up the measure when it returns from August recess.

“Katrina wreaked tremendous havoc and damage, but it couldn’t wash away and destroy the resilience of the people of the Gulf Coast,” says Dodd. “To fully recover, families there need a place to call home.”

'The bottom has fallen out'

Saket Soni of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, New Orleans



Saket Soni, executive director

Photo: Chris Kromm

Formed after Hurricane Katrina struck, the New Orleans Worker Center has organized day laborers, guest workers and other affected groups to press for better working and living conditions. We spoke with Saket Soni, the group's executive director, in New Orleans.

The face of New Orleans has changed dramatically since Hurricane Katrina. At least 40 percent of the city's residents haven't returned, disproportionately African Americans. On the other hand, new immigrants have poured into the city, lured by rebuilding jobs. In March 2006, half the reconstruction workforce was Latino; by October of last year, New Orleans' new immigrant population had surged by almost a third.¹

Saket Soni thinks this new reality—and the tensions it has created in New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast—isn't an accident: It's a predictable consequence of Washington's post-Katrina policies. As director and organizer for the New Orleans Worker Center, Soni has taken dual aim at the "systematic exclusion" of African-American workers from rebuilding work and the "systematic exploitation" he sees of immigrants seeking a better life.

"The bottom has fallen out of the Gulf Coast," he says. "There are no human rights standards, no wage standards. The federal government has used public policy to create race wedges." The end result is an often cut-throat economy that benefits companies seeking cheap labor but has pitted African-American and Latino communities against each other—and left both struggling to make ends meet.

A CLIMATE RIPE FOR ABUSE

The "race to the bottom" started right after Katrina struck, Soni says. President Bush moved quickly to suspend labor standards such as the Davis-Bacon Act, which guarantees workers will be paid a prevailing wage, as well as affirmative action requirements. Immigration enforcement and the National Guard were beefed up, but agencies tasked with investigating abuses of rights violations on the job were under-staffed.

"There has been a total vacuum of accountability," says Soni. "In a single day, we have seen black workers fired and replaced by Hondurans for \$3 less an hour, and them fired and replaced by guest workers for \$3 less. We need to create a bottom in the Gulf Coast—a floor of standards, wages, rights and conditions." These standards, he adds, should apply to documented and undocumented, foreign and U.S. workers alike.

The Worker Center also calls on the federal government to step up enforcement of workers' rights.

"The federal government on the one hand starved agencies like the Department of Labor and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to the point they were almost a joke," Soni says. "On the other hand, they boosted the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Department of Homeland Security and the military police and the New Orleans Police Department to the point where the only kind of enforcement was punishment-oriented law enforcement."

FAILING THE NEW ORLEANS TEST

Soni and the Worker Center also believe that post-Katrina New Orleans has revealed the failures of national immigration policy, including the H2B "guest worker" program that President Bush and Congressional leaders have proposed expanding.

Guest workers have come to the Gulf Coast from around the world: Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Carib-

bean, Africa. They are often lured by recruiters who charge \$5,000 to \$15,000 for their services.

“The recruiter promises the world: 40 hours a week, a room in a hotel, eventually legal permanent status and the ability to bring your family,” says Soni, recounting stories from New Orleans workers. “They find out most of the promises were false.”

The jobs usually turn out to be temporary, with hourly pay, no overtime wages, and fewer hours than promised. But the workers are stuck, because the H2B program mandates they can work only for the employer who brought them. “You’re chained to the debt you accumulated,” Soni explains. “It leads to conditions workers have described as modern-day slavery.”

Through their Alliance of Guest Workers for Dignity, Worker Center staff members have heard harrowing stories of abuse: workers abandoned without pay, and retaliation on and off the job, including physical

assaults. But the workers have few legal protections at their disposal.

“The legislative solutions [for immigration] proposed over the last six months have all failed the New Orleans test,” Soni argues—especially the guest worker program. “In New Orleans, the idea is that if the U.S. hires 200,000 to 400,000 foreign guest workers it’s a win-win situation for workers, corporate interests and the government. But the employers must certify that they can’t find domestic workers to fill the jobs. Hundreds of employers have brought in guest workers, but almost 29 percent of residents are actively seeking work.”

Soni hopes the rest of the country learns from the New Orleans experience by avoiding the politics of scapegoating, instead embracing approaches that ensure justice for all working families. “Federal lawmakers need to make public policy informed by people’s daily lived realities,” he says.

‘Only the federal government has the money to reconstruct New Orleans’

Malcolm Suber of the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, New Orleans

Malcolm Suber is a long-time activist in New Orleans and the South. After the 2005 hurricanes, he helped launch the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition, which works in New Orleans and nationally to ensure the voices of Katrina survivors are heard in Gulf reconstruction.

On the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2006, we stopped by the offices of the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund to hear their take on the post-storm recovery. When we visited again this summer to ask the same questions, Malcolm Suber—a leader of the group formed after the storms to inject the voices of survivors into the Gulf reconstruction debate—had the same answers.

“The situation here on the ground is not much changed from one year ago,” Suber says. “The vast majority of our people are still outside the city. They are getting no signs that they can come back home.”

The right of New Orleans residents to return—enshrined in the United Nations’ principles governing the treatment of Internally Displaced Persons after calamities such as hurricanes—has been a central focus of the organization.

Suber sees clear ways that these rights are being violated,



Malcolm Suber, national organizing coordinator

Photo: Roy Blumenfeld

Courtesy of IndyMedia New Orleans

starting with the lack of affordable housing. He and others point to this as the first obstacle facing residents who are struggling to come home.

“Rents in this city have doubled and sometimes tripled,” Suber says. People’s Hurricane Relief Fund has turned over thousands of signatures to the New Orleans City Council calling for rent control, using August 2005 pre-Katrina prices as the index. “We have New York prices without New York pay.”

Homeowners waiting for Road Home checks and residents of public housing—thousands of units of which are being targeted for demolition in New Orleans—face an uphill battle as well.

These barriers to housing are contributing to a growing epidemic that’s just now receiving national attention: the rise of homelessness in the Gulf Coast. In New Orleans, the homeless population has nearly doubled since January 2005, up to 12,000 people. Yet the city has less capacity to care for them: The number of homeless shelter beds has shrunk from 823 pre-Katrina to 232 today.¹

“We have homeless people camping out across from city hall right now, asking City Council to declare an end to homelessness as a goal,” Suber says. “We’re not just talking about more homeless shelters—we need a permanent solution to the housing crisis, and that is more affordable, low-income housing.”

A CHALLENGE TO THE RED CROSS

People’s Hurricane Relief Fund has also been battling the largest charity tasked with relief and recovery in the Gulf Coast. The Red Cross, chartered by Congress, received over \$2 billion in donations in the wake of the storms. Talking with Gulf residents reveals countless problems with Red Cross relief plans, which often bypassed communities most in need.

“There’s only one entity that has enough money to really reconstruct this area, and that’s the federal government.”

The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund sparked controversy this summer when they revealed that the charity was still sitting on tens of millions of dollars in its “Means to Recovery” program which gives families up to \$20,000 for building materials, used cars, job training and other needs.² The Red Cross initially launched the initiative in October 2006 with a \$71 million budget.³

“They didn’t publicize the program—they were hoping people wouldn’t claim the money,” Suber contends. After People’s Hurricane Relief Fund sent out an alert about the program’s existence, thousands of people came through

the group’s offices seeking information. Meanwhile, the Red Cross was flooded with more than 80,000 phone calls and protestors picketed its offices.⁴

“We have New York prices, without New York pay.”

The Red Cross insists the program was never a secret. But Suber says whistleblowers inside the organization have contacted him, and that a few have been fired for their criticisms that the charity wasn’t acting more aggressively to help hurricane survivors.

WHERE’S THE MONEY?

Like many in New Orleans, Suber has little patience for Washington lawmakers who claim they have demonstrated their commitment to the Gulf Coast by devoting \$116 billion to post-Katrina recovery. Suber wonders where that money is.

“They have not seen fit to spend a whole lot of the money,” Suber notes. “A lot of that is bureaucratic red tape.” Suber also speculates that it has to do with the demographic makeup of African-American New Orleans versus the political interests of a Republican administration.

The belief that lots of federal money is going to the Katrina recovery has helped push the reality of the still-devastated region out of the headlines. “The majority of folks nationally don’t know that nothing is happening on the ground here, that people have not received the money they were promised,” Suber says. “They have no idea that it’s just on paper, an empty promise.”

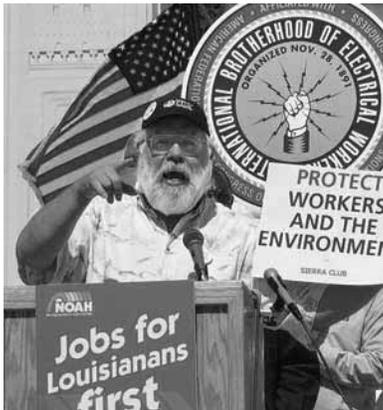
The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund believes that the voices of Gulf Coast communities must be at the forefront of any discussion of the region’s future. At the same time, those devastated by Katrina can’t do it by themselves—changes in national policy depend on people across the country speaking up for the Gulf Coast.

“There’s only one entity that has enough money to really reconstruct this area, and that’s the federal government,” says Suber. “We’ve got to create what Martin Luther King would have called a Community of Conscience that really looks out for your fellow citizens and says, ‘Yes, we have to have some federal legislation that will make people here whole.’”

“If people don’t make enough noise,” he warns, “people are going to continue to suffer.”

'The government is making people sick'

Darryl Malek-Wiley of the Sierra Club, New Orleans



Darryl Malek-Wiley, environmental justice organizer

Photo: Sierra Club

Darryl Malek-Wiley is a long-time organizer in southern Louisiana for the Sierra Club, where he has worked with dozens of communities on environmental justice issues. We talked with Darryl as he was working with the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association in New Orleans' Ninth Ward.

The federal government owes us for what happened—it's their job to help make our people whole," says Darryl Malek-Wiley as we stand in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. For years, Malek-Wiley has brought the Sierra Club's resources and muscle to help working-class and poor neighborhoods in Louisiana stand up for themselves against a variety of threats to community health and dignity.

And with Katrina, Malek-Wiley and the Sierra Club only redoubled their efforts. In talking about federal responsibility to the people of the Gulf Coast, he usually starts with the federal levees that broke down and devastated his New Orleans home.

But two years after Katrina, federal missteps continue to make life in the Gulf Coast a matter of survival. Case in point: FEMA's toxic trailers.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck, the Federal Emergency Management Agency purchased 102,000 travel trailers at a cost of \$2.6 billion to house those who had been displaced by the storm.¹ Within months, trailer residents began complaining about health problems including irritated eyes, breathing difficulties, headaches, nausea and rashes.

Eventually it was discovered that the trailers were off-gassing dangerously high levels of formaldehyde, a chemical used in manufactured wood products that's been linked to cancer and other serious health problems. Independent experts have said they think the problem is due to manufacturers using cheap materials purchased from countries where formaldehyde regulations are lax.²

It wasn't government regulators who discovered the toxic trailers: it was the Sierra Club.

But it wasn't government regulators who discovered the problem: It was the Sierra Club.

The group began testing trailers in Mississippi in April 2006 after residents reported health complaints consistent with formaldehyde exposure. After 94 percent of more than 30 tests showed formaldehyde levels higher than the exposure limits set by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Sierra Club conducted additional tests on FEMA trailers in Alabama and Louisiana. Of a total of 52 tests completed, 83 percent showed formaldehyde levels that exceeded government limits.³

"The government is making people sick," Mississippi Sierra Club spokesperson Becky Gillette said at the time.⁴ "They are putting people back in harm's way."

SPURRING FEMA TO ACTION

Though the Sierra Club's findings were widely reported around the Gulf and nation as early as May 2006, the federal government was slow to act. In fact, a year later, FEMA was still insisting residents could alleviate any formaldehyde problem by simply opening a window.

But then the agency was spurred to action.

First, several law firms filed a class-action suit against the federal government and private contractors on behalf of trailer residents who claimed lung injuries related to formaldehyde.⁵ And then U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), chair of the House Oversight and Government

Reform Committee, held a hearing at which his investigators released internal FEMA e-mails documenting that agency attorneys rejected testing of trailers over concerns that FEMA would be legally liable if health problems cropped up.

The hearing also featured testimony by Lindsay Huckabee, a resident of Pass Christian, Miss. whose family had been living in a FEMA trailer since the storm and began suffering from chronic health effects their doctors believe to be related to formaldehyde exposure. Huckabee's four-year-old daughter, Lelah, proved especially sensitive to the chemical, suffering repeated bouts of pneumonia and other problems.

"I came home one afternoon to find my daughter covering her nose; her hands, arms and shirt were covered in blood," Huckabee testified. "The surprising part is that I did not feel the need to rush to her and find out what was wrong. I did not think for a second that it was anything more than a bloody nose. Two years ago, I would have panicked trying to get to her. Later that night, I cried for hours. How had we gotten to the point where I was not surprised to see my child covered in blood?"

MORE BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

After Waxman's hearing and the subsequent public outcry, FEMA announced in July that it asked the federal Centers for Disease Control & Prevention to conduct its own public health assessment of trailer air quality. FEMA also suspended the new deployment and sales of trailers following emergencies until it addresses health concerns, and it offered to try to help residents identify other housing options.

"For instance, FEMA may authorize rental assistance when resources are available," it said.⁶

But Malek-Wiley pointed out that if FEMA were sincerely interested in marshalling resources wisely, it wouldn't be housing disaster victims in travel trailers to begin with. After all, the average cost for FEMA to deploy a trailer for 18 months is \$65,000⁷—and that's not accounting for the extra doctor bills and missed work that result from illness.

"We've heard that each FEMA trailer costs a total of \$75,000 to \$100,000 when you consider all the costs involved," Malek-Wiley says. "What if the government had simply given homeowners \$100,000?"

'We got nothing at all from the federal government'

Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, United Houma Nation, Golden Meadow, La.



Brenda Dardar Robichaux with baskets and doll made by members of the Houma tribe

Photo: Sue Sturgis

A longtime Indian education specialist with Louisiana's Lafourche Parish schools, Brenda Dardar-Robichaux also holds the elected, unpaid position of principal chief of the United Houma Nation, whose 16,000 members are concentrated in southern Louisiana, where they are the state's largest tribe. With her people largely abandoned by the government and the Red Cross after the 2005 hurricanes, Dardar-Robichaux has worked to provide resources to help them rebuild. We met in her home office near Raceland, La.

The United Houma Nation suffered a devastating one-two punch during the 2005 hurricane season. First came Katrina, whose force wiped out entire Houma communities in their historic homelands along southeast Louisiana's coast. Then came Rita, whose floods inundated Houma communities farther west in Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes.

While the tribe's recovery from Rita is progressing "quite nicely," says Principal Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, Katrina is proving a greater challenge.

One reason is that the storm was so powerful, and the Louisiana coast so vulnerable (see page 36). But another is that the federal government offered little help to the Houma. While Louisiana recognizes the tribe, the United Houma Nation lacks federal status. They've been petitioning the U.S. government for recognition since 1983 but face opposition from the oil and gas industry, which fears implications for land claims.

Consequently, Washington didn't give the tribe so much as a single grant after Katrina.

"We got nothing at all from the federal government," says Dardar-Robichaux. "Nothing."

RED TAPE AND BROKEN PROMISES

The Houma also faced problems accessing aid, in part because of the high illiteracy rate among the tribe's older members. The Houma weren't allowed to attend Louisiana public schools until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the lack of education made it hard for many Houma to meet burdensome paperwork requirements.

Washington didn't give the tribe so much as a single grant after Katrina.

"I can understand them wanting to ensure accountability, but this is extreme," Dardar-Robichaux says. "You have people who want to come home, but because of the red tape they can't."

To work around the literacy problems, she organized a public forum for FEMA officials to discuss available assistance and how to get it. But while displaced Houma from throughout southern Louisiana came, FEMA failed to show up. On another occasion, she arranged for FEMA to spend time meeting with tribal members, but agency officials came for only a few hours on weekdays before heading back to Baton Rouge.

"It was so frustrating," Dardar-Robichaux says. "People have lives. They've got to work."

The Houma experienced similar problems with the Road Home, a housing assistance program funded by the federal government but administered by a private firm—ICF International of Fairfax, Va.—on behalf of Louisiana. Faced with another complicated application, tribal leaders organized a meeting for Road Home staff to share information. The Houma came, but Road Home did not. The tribe tried again, organizing a second forum. Again, Road Home was a no-show.

"They didn't come," says Dardar-Robichaux, who knows of very few tribal members who've received Road Home money. "They committed to, and they didn't."

'TAKE BACK YOUR DAMN COTS'

The American Red Cross was also of little help to the Houma. But it wasn't for a lack of generosity among the larger American Indian community, which donated to the Red Cross millions of dollars earmarked for indigenous victims of Katrina and Rita. It also wasn't for a lack of asking by the Houma.

"In the beginning, people would apply to the Red Cross for assistance and stay up around the clock just to try to get through," Dardar-Robichaux says. "When they would finally get to the place where the organization was handing out relief supplies, they would get a [meal-ready-to-eat]. The Red Cross offered nothing substantial."

Instead of promised beds, the Red Cross brought cots—and told the Houma Nation they needed to be returned or the tribe would be financially liable.

Months later, Dardar-Robichaux attended a Red Cross meeting in Washington to discuss the failed response. Embarrassed and wanting to set things right, officials offered the tribe several hundred beds. Though they weren't the first item on Dardar-Robichaux's list, she figured they'd still come in handy for some of the thousands of displaced Houma.

But when the delivery truck arrived at the tribal offices, the "beds" turned out to be metal-frame cots. And then the Red Cross instructed the Houma that they were to return the cots when they were through using them—and that the tribe would be held financially liable if any of them were missing or damaged.

"I told them, 'You can take back your damn cots,'" Dardar-Robichaux says.

PEOPLE HELPING WHEN THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T

Abandoned by the federal government, the Houma created their own modest assistance program, funded with grants and donations from religious and humanitarian organizations and money raised at their traditional food booth at New Orleans' Jazz & Heritage Festival.

The tribe offered \$1,000 grants that members could use to repair damaged homes or make down payments on new homes. They also made \$1,000 grants available to help members rebuild businesses.

Others also stepped in to help. A delegation of Native American doctors provided free tetanus and flu shots. A California high school held a “break the rules day” fundraiser that collected \$10,000 for the Houma. College students spent spring break helping tribal members, and members of the American Indian Movement organized a walk through Houma communities to draw attention to their plight.

“We are so grateful for all the organizations, churches and individuals who’ve reached out to us,” says Dardar-

Robichaux. “I’d hate to think where we’d be without them.”

But for the Houma, full recovery remains a long way off. That’s apparent to Dardar-Robichaux every time she steps outside: She still has relatives from St. Bernard Parish living in a trailer in her front yard, and the tribe’s vice principal chief stays in a mobile home out back.

“I’m living every day with examples of how displaced our people are,” she says.

Coastal restoration: a human rights issue

Coastal land loss is an enormous problem facing Louisiana. For decades the state has been losing up to 40 square miles of coastal wetlands each year, which represents 80 percent of the nation’s annual coastal wetlands loss.¹ If nothing is done soon to slow the current loss rate, the Gulf of Mexico could move as much as 33 miles inland in places, swallowing entire communities.

Land loss is already making coastal residents more vulnerable to hurricanes and floods. But it threatens the very cultural survival of the Houma people, who are indigenous to the bayous and fishing communities of south Louisiana. Even today, many Houma maintain ancient hunter-gatherer traditions that bind them closely to the land.

“We witness firsthand on a daily basis how coastal erosion affects communities,” says United Houma Nation Principal Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, pointing out that Gulf Coast waters are now literally lapping at some members’ doorsteps. “It’s just a matter of time before some of our communities no longer exist.”

Dardar-Robichaux recounts attending a recent conference on coastal land loss. One researcher stood before a map of Louisiana and drew a line across the area of the state most at risk of being submerged in the Gulf in coming decades. It included most of the Houma lands.

“It’s frightening,” says Dardar-Robichaux, who’s upset that such a calamity is happening on her watch.

THE WINDOW FOR ACTION IS CLOSING

There are various factors behind Louisiana’s escalating land loss: dredging of oil and gas access canals, channeling of natural waterways, construction of levees, and coastal development in general. At the same time, a warming global climate is causing sea levels to rise, while natural subsidence is causing land to sink. Given the threats, experts say we probably have only a decade left to act before facing a catastrophic loss of coastal communities.²

Washington has made some efforts to curb Louisiana’s land loss. In 1990, Congress passed the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, which designated about \$60 million annually for work in Louisiana. And in August 2007, the House passed a \$21 billion Water Resources Development Act that includes \$1.9 billion for coastal wetlands restoration work in the state.

However, President Bush has threatened to veto that bill. While many observers have assumed the 381-40 vote approving the legislation means any veto could be easily overridden, House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-S.C.) recently warned that coming up with the two-thirds majority needed could in fact be difficult.³

Either way, the money this bill provides for coastal restoration is a fraction of what’s actually needed: In 2002, the Committee on the Future of Coastal Louisiana estimated that a comprehensive program to restore the state’s coastal wetlands to a sustainable level would cost at least \$14 billion.⁴

U.S. HAS A 'PARTICULAR OBLIGATION'

If federal officials are reluctant to spend \$1.9 billion on restoring Louisiana’s coastal wetlands, getting them to commit the full \$14 billion needed might seem impossible.

But in fact, they may not have a choice—at least not if they want to avoid being labeled human-rights violators.

Since Hurricane Katrina, a new political discourse has emerged among Gulf Coast activists emphasizing the U.S. government’s responsibilities to people affected by the storm under international human rights law—more specifically, under the United Nation’s Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which govern the treatment of people uprooted by natural disasters as well as conflict.

“Government authorities claim that they are doing all that the law and established policy allow to address the ongoing issues affecting the hundreds of thousands that are still displaced,” says Ajamu Baraka, executive director of the Atlanta-based U.S. Human Rights Network. “But we beg to differ. A set of principles—created and acknowledged by nations throughout the world, including the United States—already exists and provide clear guidelines for how governments can protect the fundamental human rights of people who have been displaced.”

And as Guiding Principle 9 makes clear, the U.S. government has a special duty to protect the Houma and other native people threatened by the loss of coastal land: “States are under a particular obligation to protect against the displacement of indigenous peoples, minorities, peasants, pastoralists and other groups with a special dependency on and attachment to their lands,” the principle says.

That the Houma have a special attachment to “Yakni Houma”—Houma land—is clear. So is the impact that losing the land would have. As historian and United Houma Nation Vice Principal Chief Michael T. Mayheart Dardar has written, “If settlements are abandoned and populations are allowed to disperse, with them goes the cultural integrity of our people.”⁵

The U.S. government must take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that doesn’t happen.

Gulf Coast Organizations

The Institute for Southern Studies interviewed 40 community leaders across the Gulf Coast to inform the findings of this report. The following is contact information for the organizations we consulted.

ACORN

1024 Elysian Fields Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70117
Phone: 504-943-0044
www.acorn.org

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights

650 Poydras Street, Suite 2523
New Orleans, LA 70130
Phone: 504-799-3060
www.ehumanrights.org

All Congregations Together (ACT)

1050 Jefferson Davis Parkway,
Suite 325
New Orleans, LA 70125
Phone: 504-304-2281

Boat People SOS

833 Howard Avenue
Biloxi, MS 39530
Phone: 228-436-9999
www.bpsos.org

Center for Environmental and Economic Justice

336 Rodenberg Avenue
Biloxi, MS 39531
Phone: 228-374-3010
www.envirojustice.com

Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East

www.saveneworleanseast.org

Coastal Women for Change

Biloxi, MS
Phone: 228-297-4849
www.cwcbiloxi.org

Family and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

1600 Oretha C. Haley Boulevard
New Orleans, LA 70113
Phone: 504-522-5437
www.ffcic.org

Gulf Coast Latin-American Association

983 Howard Avenue
Biloxi, MS 39530
Phone: 228-697-7322
www.gclaa.com

Holy Cross Neighborhood Association

5130 Chartres Street
P.O. Box 3417
New Orleans, LA 70177
Phone: 504-324-9955
www.holycrossneighborhood.org

Louisiana Environmental Action Network

P.O. Box 66323
Baton Rouge, LA 70896
Phone: 225-928-1315
www.leanweb.org

Louisiana Justice Institute

1631 Elysian Fields Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70117
Phone: 504-304-7947
www.louisianajusticeinstitute.org

Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance

178 Main Street, Suite 103
Biloxi, MS 39530
Phone: 228-386-5164
www.yourmira.org

Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights

213 Main Street
Greenville, MS 38701
Phone: 662-334-1122
www.msworkerscenter.org

Moving Forward Gulf Coast

P. O. Box 3245
Slidell, LA 70459-324
Phone: 985-643-6186
www.movingforwardgc.org

New Orleans Survivor Council

2226 Ursulines Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70119
Phone: 504-872-9591
www.peoplesorganizing.org

New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice

916 St. Andrew Street
New Orleans, LA 70130
www.neworleansworkerjustice.org

People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

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United Houma Nation

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Phone: 985-475-6640
www.unitedhoumanation.org

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ABOUT GULF COAST RECONSTRUCTION WATCH

Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch was launched in November 2005 to document and investigate the rebuilding of the Southern Gulf in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Through original reporting, in-depth features, voices from community leaders, and other unique coverage, Gulf Watch aims to keep Katrina on the national policy agenda and promote a healthy and just reconstruction in the Gulf.

Gulf Watch has received national attention for its leading reports on the Katrina recovery, including **The Mardi Gras Index** (Feb./March 2006), **Storm Cloud Over New Orleans** (June 2006), **One Year after Katrina** (Aug./Sept. 2006) and **A New Agenda for the Gulf Coast** (Feb. 2007). These and other reports have brought widespread attention to Katrina and Gulf Coast issues, being featured by over 110 media outlets including ABC News, BBC World News, "Live with" CNN, Cox News Service, National Public Radio, Reuters, Time.com and XM Radio. For more information, visit www.southernstudies.org/gulfwatch

Gulf Watch is a project of the **Institute for Southern Studies** and **Southern Exposure** magazine. Founded in 1970 by civil rights veterans, the Institute is a non-profit research and education center that combines research, media and advocacy programs to promote a democratic, just and sustainable future in the South. *Southern Exposure*, the Institute's flagship publication, has garnered dozens of prestigious awards for its insightful coverage of the South, including the National Magazine Award for Public Interest Reporting, the John Hancock Award for Business and Financial Journalism, and most recently the George Polk Award for Magazine Reporting.

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