



Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now

ACORN Proposal for Hurricane Katrina Recovery and Rebuilding

What low- and moderate-income communities in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast – including ACORN members, their families, friends and neighbors – experienced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina was not just a tragic natural disaster, but a brutal display of the consequences of racial and economic injustices that many of us already know too well. As the largest community-based organization of low- and moderate-income families in New Orleans and the nation, ACORN is committed to helping our sisters and brothers whose lives have been shattered by Hurricane Katrina. We are also dedicated to fighting the inequities that shaped this tragedy – and which impact low- and moderate-income communities throughout our country on a daily basis. For hurricane survivors, ACORN members demand:

1 – A Fundamental Principal: Respect

Low- and moderate-income people who have survived Hurricane Katrina need their persons and views to be respected. They need to be treated with dignity. They also need to be directly involved in developing and implementing relief and reconstruction programs.

2 – Meeting Immediate Needs

Basic necessities must be made immediately and easily available to all those displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Survivors need access to safe and decent housing, schools for their children, living wage jobs and other income to support their most basic needs, and healthcare to address both the health issues caused or exacerbated by the hurricane, and any underlying medical conditions. Access to these essential services should be clear, convenient and adequately staffed to quickly assist all survivors.

3 – Long-Term Needs

None of the individuals or families left without homes, jobs, income or their community of support should fall through the cracks.

JOBS AND INCOME SUPPORT: The recovery and rebuilding plan for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast must quickly provide sufficient, living wage employment to enable and encourage survivors to return home. Hurricane survivors also need family-supporting income from programs like food stamps, unemployment, disability, and possibly new income assistance programs. This support must be adequate to meet families' needs, and last long enough to take into account the total disruption caused by the hurricane. We need legislation to improve unemployment benefits by increasing benefit levels, and extending benefit months along with legislation to ease and broaden access to food stamps, TANF, and other income support programs. Benefits must be available to those in need regardless of their immigration status.

HOUSING: Hurricane survivors need a swift transition to decent, long-term housing in the communities they have evacuated to which will require both rehabilitation of vacant houses or the release of large numbers of new housing vouchers. Affordable housing for displaced hurricane survivors must add to - rather than compete with - affordable housing and housing assistance programs for low-income families in host communities. In addition, the individuals, communities, and cities that are opening their homes to sur-

vivors need federal assistance, too. Survivors who are homeowners also need extended moratoriums on mortgage interest and collections, and the negotiation of realistic payment plans that include debt forgiveness where appropriate.

HEALTH CARE: There should be an aggressive plan to make free health care services available to help survivors cope with both the physical and mental toll of Katrina and its aftermath, along with regular health issues. This care should be provided through a rebuilt and revitalized public healthcare system. It should be easy to use and people should be encouraged to use it. ACORN supports proposals to expand access to Medicaid, along with speeding and easing the application process. Survivors also need swift access to counseling.

EDUCATION: Around the country, public schools and school districts that are taking in new students need financial support, additional counselors to help students whose lives have been disrupted by the hurricane, and a relaxation of criteria of the No Child Left Behind Act that might penalize schools for taking in new students. In New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, public schools should receive sufficient federal funding to not only clean up and reopen, but to finally provide the first-class education that can help overcome long-standing inequalities.

CONSUMER PROTECTIONS: Homeowners and car owners will need standard and clear procedures, hands-on assistance, and consumer advocacy support in dealing with private insurance claims. Low- and moderate-income credit card holders need moratoriums on payments and interest, adjusted payment plans and, where appropriate, debt forgiveness, along with a way to protect themselves from damage to their credit records as a result of Katrina. New and burdensome bankruptcy requirements should not apply to people impacted by Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans and Gulf Coast residents will also need legal protections and consumer advocacy to avoid financial scams arising in the wake of the hurricane.

4 – Rebuilding New Orleans

Low- and moderate-income people and people of color – who make up the majority of New Orleans' population – must have a say in all major decisions about the city's reconstruction, as well as in decisions about the fate of their own homes. ACORN members are deeply worried that without strong standards with regard to fair housing, and a "right of return" for those who want it, the city's housing stock will be rebuilt at prices low- and moderate-income people can never afford. ACORN members are also concerned that what affordable housing that is built will be shoddy and fall apart after only months, that health hazards caused by the hurricane will not be fully repaired in low-income neighborhoods, and that cronyism rather than fairness will control the rebuilding process.

Rebuilding plans for New Orleans must include: decent, affordable housing for all low- and moderate-income residents and "first source" hiring agreements and living wage requirements for all reconstruction projects so that area residents get first priority for employment. These jobs should include health insurance, adequate health and safety standards, and guaranteed union organizing rights at all agencies and contractors. The recovery plan should also include cleanup of all parts of the city to meet adequate health and safety standards including attention to lead hazards and safety precautions like raising the level of housing to better prepare for future storms.

5 – Accountability: Creation of a Hurricane Katrina Commission

An independent Hurricane Katrina Commission must be formed quickly to investigate the decisions, actions, and circumstances which so magnified the devastating impact of this natural disaster. There must also be a commitment to act on commission findings. The investigation should look at all pieces of the puzzle, including how the evacuation plan failed to take into account people without cars or savings, how policy decisions were made about protecting New Orleans from strong storms and hurricanes, and the actions of FEMA and others before, during and after the hurricane. Hearings to document the experiences of hurricane survivors must be held swiftly in Baton Rouge, Houston, and other places where large numbers of survivors are gathered.