

# GLOBAL NETWORK FOR JUSTICE

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## Feeding 18,000 Families a Month in One Neighborhood

## The Right to Return to New Orleans by BILL QUIGLEY



Debra South Jones received the New Orleans Bread for the World Lindy Boggs Hunger Awareness Award on December 10, 2006. Sister Jane Remson, Director of New Orleans Bread for the World presented the award.

Each morning, Debra South Jones drives 120 miles into New Orleans to cook and serve over 300 hot free meals each day to people in New Orleans East, where she lived until Katrina took her home. Ms. Jones and several volunteers also distribute groceries to 18,000 families a month through their group, Just the Right Attitude. Who

comes for food? "Most of the people are working on their own houses because they can't afford contractors," Ms. Jones said. "They are living in their gutted-out houses with no electricity."

Why do thousands of people need food and why are people living in gutted-out houses with no electricity? Look at New Orleans eighteen months after Katrina and you will realize why it is so difficult for people to exercise the human right to return to their homes.

Half the homes in New Orleans still do not have electricity. Eighteen months after Katrina, a third of a million people in the New Orleans metro area have not returned.

FEMA told Congress that 60,000 families in Louisiana still live in 240 square foot trailers usually at least 3 to a trailer. The Louisiana Hurricane Task Force estimated in December 2006 that there was an "urgent need" for 30,000 affordable rental apartments in New Orleans alone and another 15,000 around the rest of the state.

Eighteen months after Katrina, over 80 percent of the 5100 New Orleans occupied public housing apartments remained closed by order of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which controlled the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) since 2002. HUD pressed ahead even though internal HANO documents revealed the cost for repair and renovation was significantly less than for demolition and redevelopment. A professor from MIT inspected the buildings and declared them structurally sound. Architecture critics applaud the current garden-style buildings. Yet HUD plows ahead planning to spend tens of millions of Katrina dollars to tear down millions of

dollars of habitable housing and end up with far fewer affordable apartments a clear loss for the community.

Over \$100 billion was approved by Congress to rebuild the Gulf Coast. Over \$50 billion of that money was allocated to temporary and long-term housing. Just under \$30 billion was for emergency response and Department of Defense spending. Over \$18 billion was for State and local response and the rebuilding of infrastructure. \$3.6 billion was for health, social services and job training and \$3.2 for non-housing cash assistance. \$1.9 billion was allocated for education and \$1.2 billion for agriculture.

Louisiana received \$10 billion to fix up housing. Over 109,000 homeowners applied for federal funds to fix up their homes. Eighteen months later, less than 700 families have received this federal assistance. Renters, who comprised a majority of New Orleans, are worse off they get nothing at all. Some money is scheduled to go to some landlords and apartment developers for some apartments at some time.

There were uncountable generous and courageous and heroic acts of people and communities who stretched themselves to assist people displaced by the hurricane. Many of these continue. However, there are several notable exceptions.

Obstacles to public funding of affordable housing came from within New Orleans and in neighboring parishes. Many in New Orleans do not want the poor who lived in public housing to return.

St. Bernard Parish, a 93 percent white suburb adjoining New Orleans, enacted a post-Katrina ordinance which restricted home owners from renting out single-family homes "unless the renter is a blood relative" without securing a permit from the government.

Jefferson Parish, another adjoining majority-white suburb, unanimously passed a resolution opposing all low-income tax credit multi-family housing in the areas closest to New Orleans effectively stopping the construction of a 200 unit apartment building on vacant land for people over the age of 62 and any further assisted housing.

Across Lake Ponchartrain from New Orleans, the chief law enforcement officer of St. Tammany Parish, Sheriff Jack Strain, complained openly about the post-Katrina presence of "thugs and trash" from "New Orleans public housing" and announced that people with dreadlocks or "chee wee hairstyles" could "expect to be getting a visit from a sheriff's deputy."

With rebuilding starting up and the previous work force still displaced, tens of thousands of migrant workers have come to the Gulf Coast to work in the recovery. Many were recruited. Most workers tell of being promised good wages and working conditions and plenty of work. Some paid money up front for the chance to come to the area to work. Most of these promises were broken. A tour of the area reveals many Latino workers live in houses without electricity, others live out of cars. At various places in the city whole families are living in tents.

Many former residents of New Orleans are not welcome back. Race is certainly a factor. So is class. As New Orleans native and professor Adolph Reed notes: "With each passing day, a crucially significant political distinction in New Orleans gets clearer and clearer: Property owners are able to assert their interests in the polity, while non-owners are nearly as invisible in civic life now as in the early eighteenth century."

New Orleans is now the charter capital of the U.S. All the public schools on the side of the Mississippi which did not flood were turned into charters within weeks of

Katrina. The schools with strongest parental support and high test scores were flipped into charters. The charters have little connection to each other and to state or local supervision. Those in the top half of the pre-Katrina population may be getting a better education. Kids without high scores, with disabilities, with little parental involvement who are not in charters are certainly not getting a good education and are shuttled into the bottom half - a makeshift system of state and local schools.

John McDonogh, a public high school created to take the place of five pre-Katrina high schools, illustrates the challenges facing non-charter public education in New Orleans. Opened by the State school district in the fall, as of November, 2006, there were 775 students but teachers, textbooks and supplies remained in short order months after school opened. Many teens, as many as one-fifth, were living in New Orleans without their parents. Fights were frequent despite the presence of metal detectors, twenty-five security guards and an additional eight police officers. In fact several security guards, who were not much older than the students were injured in fights with students. Students described the school as having a "prison atmosphere." There were no hot lunches and few working water fountains. The girls' bathrooms did not have doors on them. The library had no books at all, not even shelves for books in early November. One 15 year old student caught the 5am bus from Baton Rouge to attend the high school. "Our school has 39 security guards and three cops on staff and only 27 teachers," one McDonogh teacher reported.

It took two federal civil rights actions in January 2007 to force the state to abolish a waiting list for entry into public school that stranded hundreds of kids out of school for weeks.

Healthcare is in crisis. The main public healthcare provider, Charity Hospital, which saw 350,000 patient visits a year, remains closed, as do half the hospitals in the city. It is not clear it will reopen. Plans are being debated which will shift indigent care and its state and federal compensation to private hospitals. Much of the uncompensated care provided by Charity has shifted to other LSU hospitals with people traveling as far as 85 miles to the Earl K. Long Hospital in Baton Rouge which reports a 50 percent increase in uncompensated care. Waiting lines are long in emergency rooms for those who have insurance. When hundreds of thousands lost their jobs after Katrina, they lost healthcare as well. A recent free medical treatment fair opened their doors at 6 am and stopped signing people up at 8 am because they had already filled the 700 available slots for the day.

Mental health is worse. A report by the World Health organization estimates that serious and mild to moderate mental illness doubled in the year after Hurricane Katrina among survivors. Despite a suicide rate triple what it was a year ago, the New York Times reported ten months after the storm New Orleans had still lost half of its psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists and other mental health care workers.

In the months after Katrina, the 534 psychiatric beds that were in metro New Orleans shrank to less than 80. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed the area and found 45 percent of residents were experiencing "significant stress or dysfunction" and another 25 percent were worse.

By default, the lack of mental health treatment facilities has forced more of these crises towards law enforcement. "The lack of mental health options forced the New Orleans Police Department to incarcerate mentally ill

people who normally would have been taken to Charity," said James Arey, commander of the NOPD crisis negotiation team. "The only other option is to admit them into emergency rooms ill-equipped to handle psychotics who may have to wait days for care. This is past the point of being unsafe," Arey said. "It's just a matter of time before a mental patient goes berserk in one of the ERs and hurts some people."

With day care scarce down 70 percent, and public transportation down 83 percent of pre-Katrina busses, there is little chance for single moms with kids.

It is impossible to begin to understand the continued impact of Katrina without viewing through the lenses of race, gender and poverty. Katrina exposed the region's deep-rooted inequalities of gender, race, and class. Katrina did not create the inequalities; it provided a window to see them more clearly. But the aftermath of Katrina has aggravated these inequalities. In fact if you plot race, class and gender you can likely tell who has returned to New Orleans. The Institute of Women's Policy Research pointed out "The hurricanes uncovered America's longstanding structural inequalities based on race, gender, and class and laid bare the consequences of ignoring these underlying inequalities."

The pre-Katrina population of 454,000 people in the city of New Orleans dropped to 187,000. The African-American population of New Orleans shrank by 61 percent or 213,000 people, from a pre-Katrina number of 302,000 down to 89,000. New Orleans now has a much smaller, older, whiter and more affluent population.

Crime plagues parts of the city and every spoke of the criminal justice wheel is broken. Hundreds of police left the force and several were just indicted for first degree

murder of an unarmed mentally retarded man during Katrina. When the accused police reported to jail, they were accompanied by hundreds of fellow officers holding up signs calling them heroes. The DA and the police are openly feuding and pointing fingers at each other. The judges are fighting with the new public defender system. Victims and witnesses are still displaced. People accused of serious crime walk out of jail because of incompetence and the fear of witnesses to cooperate with police.

Others are kept in jail too long because they are lost in the system. For example, Pedro Parra-Sanchez was arrested six days after he arrived in New Orleans to find work in October 2005. He got in a fight and allegedly stabbed a man with a beer bottle. He went through the local temporary jail in a bus station and two other Louisiana prisons. Under Louisiana law he was supposed to be charged within 60 days or released. However, he never went to court or saw a lawyer. When he did not show up for his original arraignment date last May, a warrant was put out for his arrest, but he was already incarcerated. He was found by a Tulane Law Clinic attorney and was released in November 2006. Lost in the system, he was doing what they call in the courthouse "Katrina time."

Though crime is issue one in most of the city, crime is not the cause of a city dying. Crime is a symptom of a city dying. Crime is the sound of a city dying.

There are major problems with the drinking water system eighteen months after Katrina. According to the City of New Orleans, hundreds of miles of underground pipes were damaged by 480 billion pounds of water that sat in the city after Katrina. They were further damaged by the uprooting of tens of thousands of trees whose roots were wrapped around the pipes.

The city of New Orleans now loses more water through faulty pipes and joints in the delivery system than it uses. More than 135 million gallons are being pumped out daily but only 50 million gallons are being used, leaving 85 million gallons "unaccounted for and probably leaking out of the system." The daily cost of the water leaking away in thousands of leaks is about \$200,000 a day.

The second major water problem is that the leakage makes maintaining adequate water pressure extremely difficult and costly, particularly in tall office buildings. Water pressure in New Orleans is estimated at half that of other cities, creating significant problems in consumption, sanitation, air-conditioning, and fire prevention.

Insurance costs are skyrocketing for homes and businesses. So are rents. Though low-wage jobs pay a little more than before Katrina, they do not pay enough for people to afford rent.

The overall planning process for the rebuilding of New Orleans has been derailed by several competing planning operations. The Mayor initially created a Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which met for months. While the Bring Back New Orleans Commission was underway, the Urban Land Institute, a D.C. based think tank, created and released a report of recommendations in January 2006. After several months of hearings, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission issued a report issued from the Mayor's Office, but it was never funded. In April 2006, the New Orleans City Council awarded a \$2.9 million grant, funded by federal grant money, to a Miami consultant to create a plan for the 49 neighborhoods of New Orleans. A fourth planning process, the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), was launched in spring 2006 with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to integrate

all the planning processes. In September 2006, the City Council plan was released, while the UNOP process was just getting underway that fourth plan is starting to wind up now.

These problems spread far beyond their most graphic illustrations in New Orleans throughout the Gulf Coast. As Oxfam documented, government neglect has plagued the rebuilding of smaller towns like Biloxi Mississippi, and rural parishes of Louisiana, leaving the entire region in distress. In Biloxi, the first to be aided after the hurricane were the casinos, which forced low-income people out of their homes and neighborhoods. In rural Louisiana, contradictory signals by government agencies have slowed and in some cases reversed progress. Small independent family commercial fishing businesses have been imperiled by the lack of recovery funds. The federal assistance that has occurred has tended to favor the affluent and those with economic assets.

Visitors to New Orleans can still stay in fine hotels and dine at great restaurants. But less than a five minute drive away lie miles of devastated neighborhoods that shock visitors. Locals call it "the Grand Canyon effect" - you know about it, you have seen it on TV, but when you see it in person it can take your breath away.

Our community continues to take hope from the resilience of our people. Despite lack of federal, state and local assistance, people are living their lives and repairing their homes. People are organizing. Many fight for better levee protection. Some work for affordable housing. Some are workers collectively seeking better working conditions. Neighborhoods are coming together to fight for basic services. Small business owners are working together to secure grants and low-cost rebuilding loans. Others organize against crime.

We graciously accept the kindnesses of strangers who come by the hundreds every day to help us gut and rebuild our homes. Churches, synagogues, and mosques from around the country come to partner with local congregations to rebuild and resource their sisters and brothers.

The new Congress appears poised to give us a hand. Congresswoman Maxine Waters, head the House Subcommittee overseeing HUD, delivered pointed questions and criticisms to federal, state and local foot-draggers recently and promised a new day.

Young people are particularly outraged and activated by what they see they give us hope. Over a thousand law students alone will come to the gulf to volunteer over spring break with the Student Hurricane Network.

The connections between the lack of resources for Katrina rebuilding and Iraq and Afghanistan are clear to everyone on the gulf coast.

Despite the guarantees of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement that people displaced through no fault of their own have the right to return to their homes and have the right to expect the government to help them do so, far too little progress has been made.

As U.S. Congressman Emmanuel Cleaver of Kansas City observed in a recent public hearing, "When it is all said and done, there has been a lot more said than done."

But still each day, Ms. Debra South Jones and her volunteers drive into New Orleans East to dish out hot food and groceries to people in need. In the past eighteen months, they have given out over 3 million pounds of food to over 130,000 families.

We never dreamed we would be still be so needy eighteen months after Katrina. We look forward to the day when she will not have to feed us, when we will not need volunteers to gut and fix up our homes, when we can feed ourselves in our own fixed up homes in a revitalized New Orleans.



**Boxes of food are being prepared by the volunteers in a tent. If you would like to learn more about Ms. Debra South Jones and the work of her organization Just the Right Attitude, see <http://www.jtra.org> .**

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