I am America.

Betty Jane Adams stands on the foundation of her former home in Chauvin, LA, that was destroyed by Hurricane Rita. It took Adams two years and a stint in a FEMA trailer before her home was finally rebuilt in 2007. Construction was coordinated by the Terrebonne Readiness and Assistance Coalition (TRAC), based in rural Louisiana.

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Mirror on America: How the state of Gulf Coast recovery reflects on us all

As a nation we have fallen short. When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed long-standing inequities in the US, President Bush vowed to “confront this poverty with bold action.” But after three long years, many people on the Gulf Coast still lack homes and jobs.

As Americans we must stand together. We face a historic election; the next president of the US must guarantee a just, equitable, and complete recovery.

This is our mandate.

Mirror on America:
How the state of Gulf Coast recovery reflects on us all

Four-year-old Keron Alexander opens the door to his grandmother's home in New Orleans's Ninth Ward. Like many homes, Natalie Alexander's still bears the spray paint used in the immediate aftermath of Katrina to mark her dwelling after an initial search had been completed by an emergency response team.

America must take immediate action to ensure that people struggling to rebuild their communities get the support that their hard work and innovation demand.

When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita bore down on the Gulf Coast in 2005, most Americans were caught off-guard by the tragedy. For people living and working in the region, the storms and their aftermath were horrific. For people who experienced the storms only as newspaper or TV reports, few will forget the images broadcast around the world of fellow Americans struggling to survive in the ruined streets of an American city.

Yet in the three years since, another tragedy has unfolded. Although the force of the storms was an act of nature, their initial impact and what the American people have since witnessed—an uneven and often incompetent recovery effort—are the results of deliberate human acts. If we refuse to address this as a nation, it will go down in history not only as a failure of leadership, but also as a failure to hold our government accountable.

The situation grows increasingly critical, but despite challenges, there is a way forward.

A home and a decent job

Two fundamental indicators, housing and jobs, provide stark proof of the stalled recovery. Full recovery is possible only when affordable homes are coupled with secure, decent jobs. Without quality jobs and affordable housing, low- and moderate-income families are unable to return to their former lives. Decent wages allow people to return home and recreate vibrant communities by providing the necessary workforce to rebuild the region.

Affordable housing is not being rebuilt at the scale or pace needed. Wages are not keeping up with increased housing costs. And it is communities of color and low-income people who are being disproportionately affected. There are no plans to repair or replace almost half of the affordable apartments destroyed by the storms. Despite real need, more than 30,000 low-income homeowners are ineligible for rebuilding assistance and tens of thousands more have not received the level of assistance needed to rebuild their homes. Simultaneously, the workers desperately needed to rebuild the region and jump-start its economy cannot find decent jobs and are not being paid enough to keep pace with the increased cost of living.

> “I’m not saying they owe me anything. But what I am saying is that, as part of the people that live in these United States, … we deserve better.”
>
> —Kenneth Rouzan, resident of New Orleans for 51 years, displaced by Katrina

Grassroots successes

The successes in recovery to date have come largely at the hands of the people and communities of the Gulf Coast and volunteers from throughout the country. Residents mucked out their homes and are helping out their neighbors. They are standing up, organizing, marching, testifying, calling political leaders, and forming coalitions on behalf of their communities. They are demanding active involvement in recovery plans. When equipped with the resources needed to rebuild their homes and their lives, they are doing so better and stronger. Americans from coast to coast have poured out their hearts and opened their pocketbooks to help with recovery, some working hand in hand with residents.

But overcoming a disaster of this scale cannot be left to private initiative. This is not just a local matter; committed leadership at the state and federal level is needed. Even before the hurricanes, the Gulf Coast had some of the highest and most deeply entrenched poverty in the country.[1] Historical inequity can easily beget future inequities. Already we’ve seen that families with greater financial resources are recovering more quickly than lower-income families. We cannot allow the most vulnerable communities to be left behind. And we must learn from these hard lessons.

The upcoming presidential election offers an opportunity to express our commitment to a full Gulf Coast recovery. Those in the region have been creative, hard-working, and resilient. They deserve no less.

Rather than just a promise of “bold action,” our next president must replace rhetoric with results. And we, as Americans, must ensure that this is a national priority.

The slow road home The storms struck the homes of rich and poor alike, but the recovery process has not been nearly as egalitarian. What went wrong?

Three years after the storms, you only have to walk the streets of Biloxi, MS, to see that Katrina and Rita's shadow falls more heavily on some places than others.

Along the beachfront strip, a line of towering, neon-etched buildings faces the waves: casinos, rebuilt after the storms, now doing a booming business. Nearby, a block of luxury condominiums gleams blue and white as it awaits its first residents. Tourists lounge beneath colorful beach umbrellas or skip along on rented Jet Skis over the placid Gulf waters.

A few blocks inland, along the close-set, treelined streets of East Biloxi, many families are living in temporary trailers in their front yards. In this once-vibrant, predominantly African-American and Vietnamese neighborhood, houses now stand abandoned, feral cats running through the foundations, boarded-up windows turning a blank face to the street. Whole blocks of homes have disappeared—flattened to build a parking lot, or sitting empty, blades of grass inching up through the thin, sandy soil.

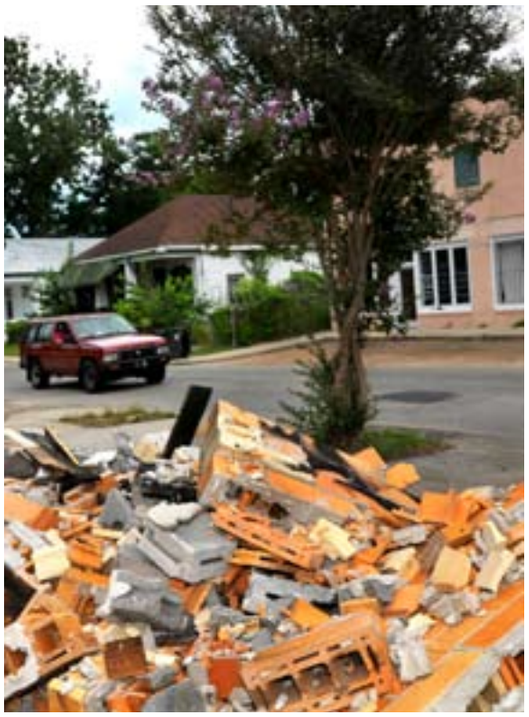
What happened to cause this disparity? Why are some neighborhoods undergoing renewal while others are not? In Biloxi—and other cities and towns on the Gulf Coast—what exactly went wrong?

Certainly the story begins with Katrina and Rita, whose winds and water damaged over 300,000 homes in the region.[2] But the difference between these neighborhoods today is the result of a series of deliberate decisions. State and federal policies for housing reconstruction seem designed to exclude low- and middle-income people, especially renters. Volunteers and local groups make a difference, but not enough to replace the government programs that are falling short. And for those still waiting to return home, the future is uncertain.

Exclusion by design

Two years after Katrina and Rita, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour made a controversial decision: he transferred $600 million from federal recovery funds to the Port of Gulfport for repairs and expansion, despite the fact that estimated storm damage to the port totaled only $50 million.[3] These funds were originally designated by the state for low-income housing recovery programs.[4]

Barbour's actions are characteristic of Mississippi's housing policies since the hurricanes. The state only began spending money to rebuild affordable rental housing in the spring of 2008, two-and-a-half years after the storms.[5] The governor's office denied homeowners assistance for wind damage, which particularly affected lower-income areas,[6] and created a two-tiered grant program that effectively penalized lower-income homeowners.[7] While the Mississippi Governor's Commission acknowledged that Hurricane Katrina "had a particularly devastating impact on low-wealth residents who lacked an economic safety net,"[8] Mississippi requested and received waivers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) releasing it from the obligation to ensure that half of the state's recovery funds benefit low- and moderate-income people.[9]



The results of these policies can be seen on the streets today. "Housing is still a big problem," says James W. Crowell III, who directs the NAACP office in Biloxi and is on the board of the Steps Coalition, a group of nonprofit organizations promoting affordable housing and equitable recovery in southern Mississippi. "Three years later, we still have people living in FEMA trailers and Katrina cottages," he says, referring to the temporary homes constructed in the past several months to replace the trailers.

Few Gulf Coast residents feel the painfully slow pace of recovery more acutely than those living in temporary housing, including almost 37,000 still living in FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers and mobile homes as of this writing.[10] Some live next to their unfinished houses, still waiting for insurance settlements, government grants, or other resources they need in order to finish the building.

After three years, many say the indignities of life in a FEMA trailer—the beds that are too short, the bathrooms into which wheelchairs just can't squeeze—become close to intolerable. Most of these families report low to moderate incomes; about a third are disabled or elderly.[11] They face debilitating health risks: the trailers are known to emit toxic levels of formaldehyde, and exposure to formaldehyde fumes has been proven to cause nausea, headaches, eye problems, respiratory ailments, and, in some cases, cancer.[12] Families also suffer from the psychological toll of living in close quarters. Yet they have few, if any, other options.[13]

This lack of options stems from the fact that many people simply can't afford to rent an apartment. Rents have shot up since the storms: in coastal Mississippi, two-bedroom units that rented for $600 before Katrina now rent for $950 to $1,200 per month.[14] Vicky Cintra, organizing coordinator of the Gulf Coast office of the Mississippi Immigrants' Rights Alliance (MIRA), says affordable housing has virtually disappeared.

"The ones that are 'affordable,' you're talking about dilapidated trailer parks, apartment complexes, or houses that still have holes in the ceilings or carpeting that's been pulled out and not put back," Cintra says. "That's still here today. And most of them are charging $700 or $800 for that. So if you've got somebody who's making $6 an hour and paying $4 a gallon for gas and $700 or $800 for an apartment, it's not adding up."

Renters shut out

"My name is Kenneth Rouzan. I'm a native of New Orleans. I've lived here 51 years of my life. I've raised 11 children, and I have 14 grandchildren."

Rouzan and his wife, Sara Ann Brown, made their home on Thalia Street in the city's Third Ward. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of their neighborhood, they managed to survive by living on the interstate for four days.

Three years later, Rouzan and Brown have not made it back to Thalia Street. Until mid-July of this year, they lived in a tent city under Interstate 10, two of New Orleans's estimated 12,000 homeless. The number of people who are homeless in New Orleans has doubled since Katrina, and more than half are newly homeless because they lost their homes or jobs—sometimes both.[15]

"The rent was $800 or $900 a month, just for a bedroom, kitchen, and bath—an efficiency in a low-income area," explains Rouzan, an Army veteran with a back injury that limits his job options. "How can you afford to pay that kind of rent when the city's economy is two decades behind the times? Now we got to live under the bridge here because we can't afford to pay the rent. …I didn't own the home. What happened was. …we got stuck out."

Of the more than 300,000 houses and apartments damaged or destroyed in the storms, 70 percent were affordable to low-income households.[16] But instead of building new affordable homes, the government is exacerbating the housing

ABOVE: The pace of recovery across the region varies dramatically, as these photos—all taken in June 2008—reflect. Clockwise from left: rubble of an African-American-owned business in downtown Biloxi, a trailer being delivered in Plaquemines Parish, and a newly built home in East Biloxi.

shortage. In New Orleans, HUD tore down thousands of affordable apartments in the city's four biggest public housing developments, where occupancy was 100 percent African-American before Katrina—although these units had in many cases suffered only minimal damage.[17]

Meanwhile, many parishes and towns are taking steps to restrict the presence of renters in their communities: denying permits to developers, banning the construction of multifamily homes,[18] creating burdensome regulations that slow the growth of affordable housing.[19] Councilors in St. Bernard Parish, a predominantly white New Orleans suburb, enacted a law prohibiting homeowners from renting their property to anyone other than a blood relative. In this case, however, the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center —alleging that this ordinance disproportionately excluded minority families from housing and perpetuated the parish's history as a segregated community—successfully sued, overturning the ordinance.[20]

And more and more people are being squeezed out of even their temporary homes. One-third of the people living under Interstate 10 with the Rouzan and Brown family became homeless after losing their federal emergency assistance or being removed from their trailers.[21] All temporary housing programs are scheduled to end in March 2009.

There is not just insufficient housing now—there are few plans to create more affordable housing in the months and years ahead.

As the interstate traffic zoomed by overhead, Rouzan said he had lost faith in the political process and had little confidence that the government would help him and his wife get back on their feet. It was the local churches, he said, that provided them with food and other necessities.

Self-help is not enough

Like Rouzan, Aida Reynon and her family relied on local community organizations to help them recover from the storms. A native of the Philippines, this widowed mother of two teenagers faced hardship when Katrina and Rita destroyed her family's house on the small plot of land they owned in Lafitte, LA.

Nearly 18 months after the disaster, this land became a haven for the family once again, thanks to massive pilings driven 20 feet into the ground. On top of them, high above the bayou, sits Reynon's new home. Moss green, and strapped tight to its pilings, the small house was constructed in just a few short weeks by a highly skilled—and highly committed—corps of volunteers whose efforts were coordinated by a grassroots community organization. "I wanted to [rebuild], but if you've only got a little money … I didn't know how to start," Reynon recalls.

In Reynon's case, good fortune came her way in the form of attentive advocates and experienced builders. But in this reconstruction, that kind of luck seems to be the rare exception.

Throughout the Gulf Coast, groups that often face discrimination—women, low-income families, people of color, the elderly—find that while the dedicated efforts of local organizations and volunteers do make a difference, self-help is not enough. They need government action, which has failed to materialize.

For example, Louisiana's "Road Home" program offers grants for homeowners to repair their homes or relocate. But nonprofit groups working with Louisiana homeowners report that many people did not receive enough money to rebuild in the current high-cost environment.[22] What's more, poorer applicants, primarily African-American and other ethnic minorities, are

receiving less grant money, as well as much lower flood and private insurance payments.[23] Predictably, neighborhoods dependent on Road Home funds are struggling to recover; locals have nicknamed it "the slow road home."[24]

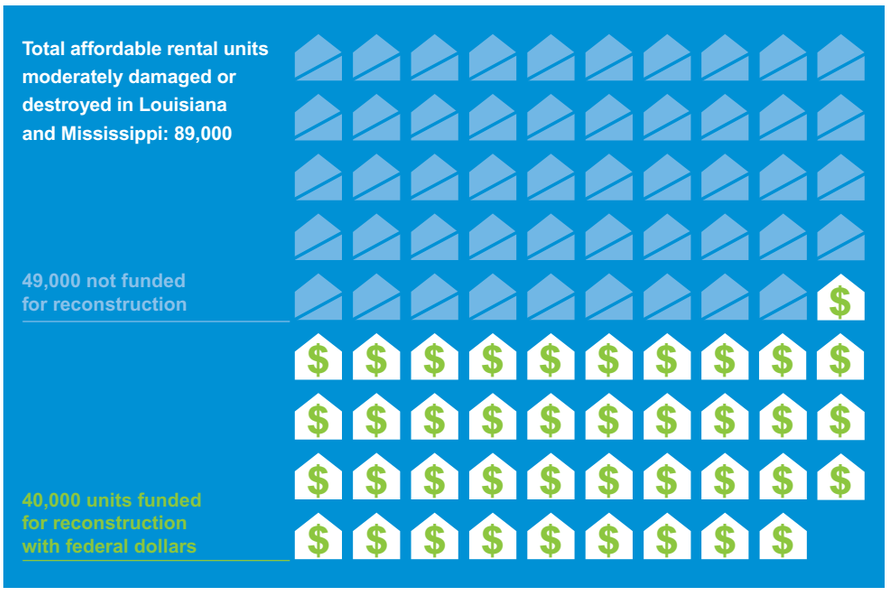
For seniors, many of whom are retired and on fixed incomes, returning home is a particular struggle. Throughout the Gulf Coast, 12,600 elderly people earning less than $9,000 a year were displaced by Hurricane Katrina.[25] Now, for every unit of senior housing in the Gulf Coast, there are 10 eligible poor senior citizens on the waiting list.[26] There are hundreds of state-subsidized units that could offer appropriate senior housing, yet many developments remain closed because they lack operating subsidies required to accept occupants—subsidies that HUD has done nothing to provide.[27]

Meanwhile, attempts by hard-working residents of the Gulf Coast to rebuild low-income housing and neighborhoods have met with mixed success. Elderly landlords throughout the Gulf Coast are having serious difficulty securing the financing they need to repair their small properties.[28] These units—a precious commodity in a region desperate for affordable rental housing—sit vacant and unrepaired.

No assurances for the future

Perhaps most stunning of all is the fact that not only is there insufficient affordable housing available now, there are no plans to restore all the housing that was lost. Renters—the vast majority of whom have low incomes—are hardest hit. An estimated 88 percent of the rental housing damaged or destroyed by Katrina was affordable to low-income families. This housing is not coming back.

Only a fraction of affordable rental units are slated to be rebuilt[29]



The numbers paint a clear picture: In Louisiana, for example, 82,000 apartments were damaged or destroyed by Katrina and Rita, but the highest official estimate proposes to replace only about 25,000 affordable units—a fraction of what was lost.[30]

The recent national economic downturn has created new obstacles to recovery. Louisiana initiated programs to rebuild senior homes, public housing, mixed-income housing, and supportive housing, as well as small rental properties that made up the majority of housing damaged or destroyed. And these promising programs have almost 25,000 units in the pipeline. But now, in addition to high construction and insurance costs, many developers are facing financing challenges. Not surprisingly, the majority of affected projects are those designed to house low-income families.[31]

Meanwhile, the days pass, more than a thousand of them since the storms. For many people on the Gulf Coast, each day might mean one more morning waking up cramped in a temporary trailer, one more afternoon wasted searching fruitlessly for an affordable apartment, or one more night spent sleeping outside. For them, the mere hint of a promise is not enough. They need immediate and real solutions in order to return home.

ABOVE LEFT: Mary Meltz stands in front of her new home on Division Street in East Biloxi, where construction is nearly complete, thanks to the efforts of Meltz's son Michael, community groups, and teams of volunteers. Visible over her shoulder is the FEMA trailer where Meltz lived for nearly three years.

“The government told us we could move back, that everything was going to be fine. But they just put a Band-Aid on while they’re waiting for more money. They didn’t make it any stronger; everything is basically the same. It’s kind of scary.”

We are America.

< The Sylvesters

After Hurricane Katrina swamped Phoenix, LA, it wasn't long before hammering, sawing, and hymns—the sounds of life and faith—filled the air of this small river town. Though only 30 of Phoenix's 166 houses were habitable after the storm, people were coming back, lured by a local pastor and his conviction that, as a community working together, they could "arise and rebuild."

And they have been.

Phoenix is in the middle of an ambitious program to build up to 100 new houses using materials provided by homeowners, labor contributed by volunteers, and two simple plans to which residents contributed their ideas. So far, they've built 11 new homes and rehabbed 28.

"We walk by faith and not by sight," says the Rev. Tyrone Edwards, pastor of a church that helped to launch the Zion Travelers Cooperative Center, a community-based organization from which has sprung much of the drive for Phoenix's revival. "We don't let what we see deter us from what we need to do. Through hard work and a whole lot of patience, we can rebuild this community."

Cradled in the quiet between the Mississippi River and the marshes that drain to Breton Sound, Phoenix was where Cleo Sylvester was born. And though she hasn't lived there in years, it probably helps account for her love of coastal Louisiana. She doesn't want to leave.

But the home she shares with her husband, Martin, is in Violet, in the parish next door, where the pace of recovery has left the couple wondering if the state will ever be whole again. Before the storm, St. Bernard Parish had 55,000 residents, says Martin, but just 30,000 today—a steep decline that directly affects the quality of their life.

The Sylvesters now have friends, relatives, and former neighbors living as far away as Utah—and with every passing year the likelihood of their returning diminishes as they make the adjustment to new schools, churches, and communities.

Prior to Katrina, the Sylvesters owned five tax-preparation stores, but now they have just two. Though some of their customers still drive from as far away as Georgia to have the Sylvesters do their taxes, their business has taken a big hit.

Population loss has been "more devastating than Katrina itself," Martin says. "We have one or two Winn-Dixies [supermarkets] when we had four before. We got only one Wal-Mart, and we have to travel 37 miles to get to that. Life is totally different than it was before."

In the year following the hurricane, the couple lived in a FEMA trailer while they put together the financing they needed to rebuild their own home. But a sense of unease hangs over them. They're not sure the patched levee near their house will hold, and they say the next big disaster may force them inland for good. In fact, they've bought a bit of insurance just in case: a plot of land in Texas on which they hope to build a house.

"The government told us we could move back, that everything was going to be fine," Martin says. "But they just put a Band-Aid on while they're waiting for more money. They didn't make it any stronger; everything is basically the same. It's kind of scary."

There might be fear in Phoenix, too, but right from the beginning the spirit of determination and self-reliance has far outweighed it.

"Phoenix has three critical ingredients for success that not every small rural community has: dedicated residents, inspiring leadership, and access to outside volunteers," says Kate Barron, Oxfam America's community development specialist in Louisiana. "We know a lot remains to be done to ensure other remote communities in rural Louisiana and Mississippi take heart from Phoenix's example and rebuild."

For Dymond Thomas, who had just finished renovating his house when Katrina hit and completely destroyed it, there was no question he would stay in Phoenix.

"This is my home," he says. "We own the land." The lane at the end of which that house stood even bears his family's surname: Thomas.

But it's more than land that makes Phoenix home. It's the people. Thomas's wife, Patricia Ann, knew everything would be all right when she awoke one morning to the grinding of gears and the revving of engines outside her trailer on Highway 15. Inching by was a convoy of trucks hauling oversized loads: it was Phoenix's new school, coming in on wheels.

"That was a happy day," she says. "If you brought the schools in, you know the families are coming back."

No way to make a living The recovery effort could have fueled an economic revitalization, creating well-paid jobs in construction, transportation, finance, and retail. Instead, with few good jobs, little affordable housing, and rising costs, workers are finding it impossible to maintain a decent standard of living.

(Left to right) Ruben Lhey, 46, an American raised in Mexico, and Ramiro Quesata, of Mexico, paint a home being renovated in New Orleans in April 2008. Workers such as Lhey and Quesata have been critical to the process of rebuilding.

The guest workers stood outside the federal courthouse in New Orleans holding up signs that read, “Dignidad.” Back home, they’d been secretaries, mechanics, and carpenters. But on this day in August 2006, they were housekeepers and maintenance workers demanding to be treated with dignity, each of them plaintiffs in a lawsuit against Decatur Hotels.[32]

Decatur was one of hundreds of Gulf Coast employers facing severe labor shortages in the wake of Katrina and Rita.[33] It chose not to hire displaced local workers—African-Americans, mostly, who had worked in the industry and, in some cases, were actually living in the hotels at the time.[34] Instead, Decatur took advantage of a federal guest worker visa program; certifying that there were no qualified people in the US available to fill the jobs, the luxury hotel chain recruited an estimated 300 immigrants, mainly from Latin America, through special “H-2B visas.”[35]

The guest workers accepted the low-wage positions because a full week’s pay was still better than what they could make back home. Within days of arriving, however, they learned the harsh reality of their new jobs. The Decatur Hotels failed to reimburse the $3,500 to $5,000 each guest worker had paid recruiters to obtain visas and plane tickets to the US.[36] And many employees, promised full-time work, were instead scheduled for substantially fewer than 40 hours.

In what has now become a disturbing trend along the Gulf Coast, an employer capitalized on the opportunity to hire cheap labor, but in the process shut out displaced local workers; they weren’t offered the jobs or, if they were, they couldn’t afford to take them. In addition, a flawed federal program, which should have helped the immigrants support their families, actually ended up pushing them further into debt.

“We should have found ourselves in a situation where, because of the dearth of employees, workers could have found wages that equaled or exceeded those of workers in places like New York and New Jersey,” says Tracie L. Washington, president and CEO of the Louisiana Justice Institute, and one of the attorneys who represented the guest workers. But instead, “You had people brought in, trafficked in, through artificial government supports. It was the perfect storm of worker exploitation and wage suppression.”[37]

In other words, workers living along the Gulf Coast have been hit by a double injustice. On one hand, they can’t afford the rising costs of rent, housing, insurance, and utilities. On the other, they can’t find the kind of jobs they need to offset those increased expenses.

Rewriting the rules

The post-hurricane construction boom could have spurred the sort of economic growth that helped rebuild Florida after Hurricane Andrew and California after the Northridge earthquake. In fact, within two weeks of the storms, the Bush administration made several decisions designed to speed up the recovery process and stimulate the economy.

But in the end, these policies encouraged employers to create disposable jobs, with wages too low to cover inflated housing costs or too precarious to protect immigrant workers or encourage local workers to return home.

- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) waived enforcement of health and safety regulations in areas affected by the hurricanes. As a result, available jobs in hazardous tasks like demolition and cleanup usually went to undocumented immigrants, who were not afforded the standard workplace protections usually mandated for American workers. In New Orleans alone, nearly half of reconstruction workers were Latino, and 54 percent of those were undocumented, according to an early survey of 212 such workers. About 28 percent of them reported working with hazardous substances or in dangerous conditions.[38]
- The administration waived provisions of the Davis-Bacon Act that require private contractors to pay prevailing wages in their federal contracts. This meant that displaced low- and moderate-income families, most of whom were African-American, could not find the quality jobs they needed to help them return home. Meanwhile, among the undocumented Latino immigrants who had come to fill hazardous jobs in New Orleans, 34 percent of those surveyed reported receiving less pay than they were owed.[39]
- The administration exempted contractors who bid on Gulf Coast work from submitting an affirmative action plan. In addition, most federal contracts bypassed local minority-owned businesses and went instead to out-of-state corporations like the Bechtel Group and KBR, formerly known as Kellogg Brown & Root, some on a no-bid basis, thus depriving local companies of a much-needed financial boost.[40]
- The administration also announced that employers working on federal contracts would not be sanctioned for failing to ensure that their workers were authorized to work in the US. At first, out-of-state companies were protected if they lured undocumented workers from Latin America and countries even farther away—at the expense of the workers’ own labor protections.

While these federal waivers were eventually rescinded, they sent a powerful signal to the marketplace and set a low threshold for the future protection of workers’ rights. In addition, in some cases, they actually heightened tensions between local workers

and the new immigrant population. This, in turn, created an anti-immigrant backlash. Under a new law signed by Mississippi Governor Barbour earlier this year, any undocumented worker can be subject to a felony conviction, including one to five years in jail and fines of up to $10,000.[41]

Disposable jobs

In most cases, an increase in the supply of jobs creates an increase in the demand for workers. And that demand translates into better pay. But since the relaxed federal laws made it easier to hire a rapidly growing—and lower-paid—immigrant workforce, many local residents were never recruited to return. In response, some displaced workers took whatever pay they could, making only as much as they did when they were "in high school."[42]

Before the storms, Renee Winn was working a good job as a VIP host for the President Casino in Biloxi, MS. But then Katrina ripped the roof off her second-story apartment. And when she tried to return to the casino, there was nothing left but kitchen jobs, she says.

Still, Winn, 39, says she was luckier than most. Her fiancé, Bernard, grew up in the Bronx and still had family in the tristate area. Through a combination of good timing and good luck, they eventually found a rent-free farmhouse in Glen Rock, New Jersey. Winn even lined up a job at the Boys and Girls Club in New York City.

But then her nine-year-old son, Oren, fell ill with Graves' disease and hypertension. So instead of reporting to work, Winn had to shuttle back and forth between medical specialists and Oren's school.

More than a year later, Winn's family found their way back to Biloxi. Winn used her family connections to land a $7.50-an-hour contract job in the Public Health Department and a house, which she uses a Section 8 subsidy to pay for. But Bernard had to move to Florida where he could find a job. And Winn's contract ended in December. Since then, she's been unable to find a job that matches her experience.

"I don't want to work at McDonald's or be a valet or a maid," she says. Even if she did, "those jobs are few and far between. And immigrants are getting those jobs."

Now Winn worries about how she'll keep things going with the rising cost of living in Mississippi. "Everything has gone up, but you're not paying the people the money to keep up," she says.

This frustration runs especially deep among the displaced workers, mostly African-Americans, who traditionally worked in construction and the hospitality industry. Given their more moderate incomes, many couldn't return home because of rising housing costs. And for others, the everyday expenses related to transportation or child care made returning to work impossible. Only 19 percent of the buses that operated in New Orleans before Katrina were running as of February 2008,[44] which meant that people in thinly populated neighborhoods who didn't own cars were unable to get to their jobs. And fewer than half the number of pre-Katrina child care centers were open after the disaster, which became a barrier many women could not overcome.[45]

These factors may help explain why only 12 percent of African-American evacuees who returned to New Orleans after the hurricanes were able to find work when they came home, compared with 45 percent of white evacuees.[46]

Exploiting immigrant workers

The H-2B guest worker program was designed to hire foreign workers to do temporary work in nonagricultural areas, often on a seasonal basis. But in the aftermath of the disaster, some companies used the program to their advantage to actively

Rising housing costs outstrip wages[43]

recruit immigrants to the Gulf Coast, luring them with promises of high wages and free housing that never materialized.

"For the first year [after Katrina], everyone wanted immigrants," says Cintra of MIRA. They "were welcomed with open arms."

This was the case with the Decatur guest workers. By hiring the immigrants, the hotel chain avoided paying a higher wage—and providing a full, 40-hour workweek—to the local workforce. To make matters worse, by refusing to reimburse the guest workers their visa and plane ticket fees, Decatur, in essence, deducted from the guest workers' wages so that they earned substantially less than the minimum wage.

The Decatur workers eventually won their case; a federal judge ruled that the guest workers were entitled to protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act, which establishes the minimum wage.[47] Still, the kinds of abuses the guest workers encountered are more readily committed and tolerated in a region of the country with no strong history or support of labor organizing. Mississippi has no Department of Labor (DOL), and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal has expressed his intention to close Louisiana's equivalent.[48]

For these reasons, even years later, many immigrants continue to face challenges over their immigration status. Fear of losing their jobs or being deported prevents many workers from complaining when they are abused by their employers—exposed to toxic substances or other workplace hazards, required to work long hours with no additional compensation, or in some cases not even paid for their work at all.

> "It was the perfect storm of worker exploitation and wage suppression."
>
> Tracie L. Washington of the Louisiana Justice Institute, on post-storm employment conditions

But, like the Decatur plaintiffs, some workers are rejecting such treatment. In March 2008, about 100 workers brought from India to work as welders and pipefitters at the Signal International shipyard in Pascagoula, MS, filed a class-action lawsuit, stating that a company recruiter tricked them into coming and that their living conditions were inhumane.[49] In May, about 25 workers staged a hunger strike outside the Indian Embassy in Washington, DC. They asked the Department of Justice to investigate Signal for "human trafficking." They launched a petition drive demanding worker rights protections and the continuation of the US and Indian governments' anti-trafficking investigation.[50] In addition, more than a dozen members of Congress signed a letter to Attorney General Michael B. Mukasey on their behalf.[51]

No good options

Three years after the storms, the economic outlook for the region is mixed at best. Low unemployment levels (3.3 percent in the greater New Orleans area) and higher wages only tell half the story.[52] Available jobs pay too little to allow a decent standard of living or are too risky to enable workers to return. Job growth is slowing, and more employers are leaving the region than are entering it.[53]

Given the lack of opportunities, is it any wonder the region's local population is stagnating? New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport, and other coastal towns remain significantly smaller now than they were before the hurricanes.[54]

If the government really is committed to rebuilding the Gulf Coast, it's going take a lot more than photo ops and tough talk. It's going to take the next president respecting, enforcing, and setting the appropriate expectations for employers when it comes to laws that govern jobs.

"It's pay. It's working conditions. And it's living conditions. It's all of that," Washington says. "We have to make workers' rights an inextricable part of development here."

ABOVE LEFT: Renee Winn talks to neighbors about a community meeting she attended the night before. Like many in Biloxi, Winn is struggling to find a job that matches her experience. ABOVE RIGHT: Brenda Chambers is one of several child care providers trained by grassroots organization Coastal Women for Change to address a shortage of affordable day care.

I am America.

“Flor” >

Earlier this year, Flor was working double shifts—putting in 15-hour days with no benefits—to finish what she had set out to do when she came to the US from Peru four years ago: to provide her children back home with the means to achieve their dreams.

Her daughter is in nursing school in Peru, and her son plans to become a police officer there. A hotel housekeeper in Biloxi, Flor is determined to see them through, and to support her mother as well.

But since Hurricane Katrina hit, waves of uncertainty have buffeted the family’s hopes. Only Flor’s drive has kept those dreams afloat.

Her first job in Biloxi paid just $7 an hour. With that, she managed to rent an apartment, support herself, and send $400 a month home to her mother and children. But when the storm flooded the hotel-casino where she worked, it washed away her hard-won security, leaving her jobless for a month. Determined not to lose ground, she started doing heavy cleaning jobs—one involved removing wet Sheetrock from the walls of a ruined hospital in the next town—until the casino reopened and she could resume her housekeeping duties.

But things are different now for immigrant workers in Biloxi—and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A lot different.

“Before Katrina, I felt like a normal person, not so different from everybody else,” says Flor. “Now I feel ignored or discriminated against because of my race, gender, or language. I don’t feel free. And I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

A new state law, effective July 1, makes it a felony for undocumented immigrants to work in Mississippi. One of the casinos Flor was working for said it would fire everyone on its staff who could not provide proof of legal immigration status.

Vicky Cintra, organizing coordinator for the Mississippi Immigrants’ Rights Alliance (MIRA), explains, “The [recent] law that was signed by Haley Barbour is the strictest in the entire 50 states: first time in the history of the US that it’s a felony to work as an undocumented worker.”

What does that mean for hard-working people like Flor? She’s not sure. But fear has replaced some of the confidence she once had. She no longer feels it’s safe to walk to work—not after the experience she had one day last September while making her way on foot to a health clinic to fill a prescription. A man drove up and asked if she needed a ride. Flor speaks very little English, but she repeated the word “hospital” several times, and the man seemed to understand.

Just after he dropped her off, however, a police cruiser pulled up and an officer arrested her on a charge of soliciting prostitution. At the police station, she was told she had just a few hours to pay a $315 fine or face deportation. She called a friend, borrowed the money, and was released.

MIRA challenged the arrest as a clear case of racial profiling and got the solicitation charge dismissed—but Flor says she lives in continual fear now of being arrested again and deported. What little free time she has, she spends in her apartment. She rarely walks anywhere and never alone if it can be avoided: when she needs to buy groceries or run errands, she goes with a friend.

The trauma of the arrest isn’t all that’s weighing Flor down. Though she’s now earning $9 an hour, the cost of living on the storm-battered coast is spiraling high and fast. A one-bedroom apartment that cost less than $400 a month before the storm has now climbed to more than $500.

Those prices mean many low-wage workers have no choice but to crowd into small, shared spaces.

“It’s easy to find apartments with seven to eight people living together in one or two bedrooms at the most,” says Cintra.

Flor, frugal and resourceful, has her own place. And the closer she moves to the dreams she has for her family, the more determined she is to reach them—despite the challenges.

“Before Katrina, I felt like a normal person, not so different from everybody else. Now I feel ignored or discriminated against because of my race, gender, or language. I don’t feel free. And I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“The storm couldn’t actually steal our joy. …
It’s just kind of hard when you’re at the bottom of the mountain again. You have to build yourself back up. … But I’m just going to keep on going. There are too many things I want to do before I leave this planet. …

Somebody needs to say enough is enough.
Let’s help our people.”

—Renee Winn, resident of Biloxi, MS

This Biloxi, MS, monument was built in memory of the victims of Hurricane Camille, which struck the Gulf Coast in 1969. This portion of the monument survived Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which bent but did not break the flagpole.

A way forward Despite obstacles, Gulf Coast residents have not waited for help. This determination challenges all of us to redouble our efforts—addressing not only the storms' damage, but historical inequity as well. Success will require nothing less than a genuine national commitment.

The East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center is located in one of the hardest hit areas of Mississippi. On a wall of the center hangs a series of maps of the peninsula that display a time sequence of the recovery: the gray areas of vacant lots still outnumber the orange areas where housing reconstruction has started, but the orange areas are gaining.

On another wall leans a chalkboard detailing "New Construction" with the names of families, their addresses, funds, planning, and current status. At the bottom of the list lies Hung Lai of 314 Crawford Street. "We won't rest," says center founder Bill Stallworth, "until Mr. Hung moves back home."

The center, like dozens of other community organizations in the region, has stepped into the gaping holes left by the storms and the failure of government response. Sweat equity has been the local currency as groups have gutted, repaired, raised up, and rebuilt homes and anchored communities. Moore Community House, a day care center in Mississippi, for example, trains women in construction skills. In New Orleans East, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church helped draw a blueprint for reviving the area through a new business district, a charter school, a housing complex for seniors, and a 20-acre organic community farm.

No amount of American generosity, volunteer spirit, and self-sufficiency, however, can compensate for the absence of a well-coordinated and adeqately funded government response.

Standing before the glare of television cameras in September 2007, a dozen Mississippi church leaders addressed state officials. Speaking as members of the "People Before Ports" campaign, they condemned a Mississippi proposal to divert federal housing recovery funds to pay instead for redevelopment of the local port.

"We're not going to roll over and play dead and watch you take that money," the Rev. Larry G. Hawkins said.

Backing the church leaders was the Steps Coalition, a network of 54 mainly local organizations that came together after Katrina. While the state held to the funding diversion, the campaign sent a shot across the bow of the Governor's Office and the Mississippi Development Authority, signaling that their actions were under public scrutiny. The issue gained national attention after Congressional hearings and national media called into question the decision. Recognizing that private efforts alone will never be enough, some Gulf Coast groups are actively engaging their public officials.

Since the storms, 100 groups across Louisiana formed the Louisiana Housing Alliance, which played a pivotal role in convincing Louisiana lawmakers to put $25 million into a housing trust fund. Groups like MIRA and the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice have relied on advocacy and public actions to ensure that immigrants have access to relief and recovery resources and that the rights of immigrant workers are protected. And recently, 120 Gulf Coast and national organizations issued a statement, "One Nation, One Gulf, One Promise," calling on the next president to commit to rebuilding the Gulf Coast better and stronger.

Gulf Coast residents have set the standard for what a dedicated recovery effort looks like. In comparison, billion-dollar state and federal programs funded to help communities have instead hobbled residents and left communities behind. Our next president must learn from the determination of these Americans and chart a new course.

“This is our community. … You take care of where you live.”

I am America.

< Sharon Hanshaw

Some people run an organization from behind a desk. But Sharon Hanshaw, executive director of Coastal Women for Change (CWC), does her work on the move. With the air conditioning blasting, gospel music playing on the stereo, Hanshaw spends her days steering her car through the narrow, tree-shaded streets of Biloxi, MS.

As she drives, Hanshaw makes frequent stops to check in on her neighbors in the low-income area of East Biloxi—people who have come to rely on her as their advocate and spokesperson. Though busy, she always has time to listen to their stories.

Stories like those of Mary Meltz, who says she lost sight in one eye because of formaldehyde fumes from her FEMA trailer, and who now stays in a hotel as teams of volunteers finish rebuilding her house. And Edith Robinson, Hanshaw's neighbor growing up in East Biloxi, who says she used her Social Security money to pay for paving her hurricane-damaged street.

Once a small businesswoman who ran her own beauty salon, Hanshaw lost her house, her car, and her business when Katrina struck Biloxi in 2005. Spurred into action after the storm, Hanshaw now follows a different calling: helping people like Meltz and Robinson make their voices heard in rebuilding their community. CWC particularly focuses on the needs of women, people of color, and low-income residents, who may be left out of the city's redevelopment plan.

The group's mission begins at the local level. Soon after its founding in January 2006, CWC convened a public forum to discuss rebuilding efforts with Biloxi's mayor and city councilors. Several of its members have since been appointed to the mayor's planning commission. "They know us there: first, last, and middle names," Hanshaw says of city hall.

Recently, advocacy efforts have taken Hanshaw farther afield—to Jackson and to Washington, DC, to urge legislators to provide more affordable housing for people left homeless by the hurricanes. Last year she joined a delegation of Gulf Coast residents who traveled to India to compare experiences with survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In June she traveled to New York City to be honored by Women's eNews as one of 21 leaders for the 21st century.

But she's mindful that the problems at home aren't going away. Housing, recreation, health care, child care, and jobs are not abstract issues in Biloxi, but topics of pressing concern.

"We find ourselves still doing direct service," Hanshaw says of CWC. "That's not our mission, but we see there's no housing going up here that's affordable, no library, no activity center, or anything for the children. ... So I have to do what's in my face right now." Among other activities, CWC founded an in-home child care program to address the shortage of affordable day care in Biloxi.

Hanshaw sees women-driven projects like these as an integral part of CWC's accomplishments. If you ask her what she is most proud of about her work, she'll tell you that it's "women stepping up" to speak out on their own behalf. "Throughout this whole process, we've created more leaders," she notes.

Despite the obstacles, Hanshaw and these everyday leaders are determined to do what it takes to rebuild their hometown. "This is our community; we want it back the way it was—or better," she says with her characteristic determination. It doesn't matter whether you rent or own, she adds: "You take care of where you live."

Recommendations

Michael Grote reviews work on the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center's project board, where new construction projects are tracked. Grote is the program manager of Architecture for Humanity, one of the organizations that works out of the center.

Oxfam America calls on the next president to:

Get people home

Coordinate recovery efforts

Create an Office for Gulf Coast Recovery, headed by a federal coordinator. The coordinator must have direct access to the president; decision-making power, including the authority to overrule state recovery plans if needed; a recovery advisory committee composed of displaced people and their advocates, with whom the coordinator would meet at least quarterly; and a mandate to focus on the recovery needs of low-income, disabled, and elderly people.

Review homeowner grants

Review for adequacy homeowner grants given in Louisiana and Mississippi, and commit to ensuring additional funds where needed to rebuild.

Make sure that all federally subsidized housing is reopened or replaced

Ensure that all families displaced from subsidized housing can return. This means either (1) providing the resources necessary to ensure that all federally subsidized housing in the Gulf Coast is repaired and reopened or (2) in cases where developments have been demolished, making sure that every affordable unit is replaced at a level affordable to its previous tenants.

Require transparency

The incoming HUD secretary must ensure that recovering Gulf Coast states provide regular reports to the public on the use of federal recovery dollars. These reports should include information on the distribution of funds according to income, race, gender, and disability.

Provide funds to create additional affordable rental housing

Work with Congress to appropriate funds for accessible, affordable housing through the Section 811 (housing for the disabled) and Section 202 (housing for the elderly) programs to meet the needs of those who often face the greatest challenges to recovery. Provide five years' additional Low-Income Housing Tax Credits to affected states to allow greater progress toward meeting storm-exacerbated housing needs.

Extend temporary housing programs

Ensure that all temporary housing programs are extended at least through 2010—until people have adequate resources to rebuild all affordable housing lost to the storms.

Ensure decent jobs

End abuses of guest workers

Commit to ending labor abuses under the existing H-2B nonagricultural guest worker program. Stronger oversight requires (1) stepped-up on-site inspections for safety and health violations, (2) elimination of recruitment fees, and (3) compliance with requirements that no local workers are available and that prevailing wages are paid.

Monitor and act on worker rights abuses

Ensure compliance with US labor laws—including enforcement of OSHA requirements—in all reconstruction efforts. Coordinate with the new secretary of labor to investigate and prosecute workplace abuse and discrimination complaints on the Gulf Coast. Provide sufficient funding for the DOL to hire and train bilingual staff.

Create good jobs

Work with Congress to enact legislation that develops the skills of the Gulf Coast workforce and creates jobs that pay living wages.

Get it right next time

Require stronger oversight for housing recovery

For future emergency Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) allocations, (1) provide HUD discretion to veto a state's action plan if the state's use of CDBG funds strays from the Congressional purposes and requirements; (2) give legal standing to community-level groups or recovery beneficiaries to bring actions against state use of federal funds if they stray from Congressional mandates; and (3) require states to present for public comment a comprehensive, global plan for use of emergency CDBG funds.

Prevent discrimination

HUD and the Department of Justice should monitor communities' attempts to block the rebuilding of affordable rental housing through zoning restrictions and other means. Tie municipal and county receipt of CDBG or FEMA funds to federal requirements to remove barriers to affordable housing and discourage discrimination.

Partner with local organizations

Mandate that FEMA and HUD partner with local organizations on relief, recovery, and rebuilding work. To streamline and expedite assistance, support and fund organizations with existing relationships in affected communities.

Ensure compliance with labor laws

Reform federal agencies that are responsible for enforcing wage, hour, health, and safety laws so that they actively enforce existing labor laws during reconstruction. Commit to ensuring that existing protections, such as those in the Davis-Bacon Act, aren't abrogated during a disaster.

Review and reform the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

Revise the FLSA in order to make general contractors responsible for violations of law committed by subcontractors.

Notes

Oxfam America assumes full responsibility for the documentation, conclusions, and recommendations in “Mirror on America.” This document may be reproduced and quoted extensively, provided that credit is given to Oxfam America. For more information or to download a PDF of this report, go to **www.oxfamamerica.org/gulfcoast**.

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www.bayougrace.org

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www.themastersite.com/BISCO.html

Louisiana CDC Collaborative
Baton Rouge, LA

Louisiana Environmental Action Network
Baton Rouge, LA
www.leanweb.org

Louisiana Housing Alliance
New Orleans, LA

Louisiana Justice Institute
New Orleans, LA
www.louisianajusticeinstitute.org

Marketumbrella.org, New Orleans, LA
www.marketumbrella.org

New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, New Orleans, LA
www.neworleansworkerjustice.org

PICO LIFT (Louisiana Interfaith Together)
Baton Rouge, LA
www.picolouisiana.org

The Pro Bono Project, New Orleans, LA
www.probono-no.org

Rebuild Iberia Inc., New Iberia, LA

Southern Mutual Help Association Inc.
New Iberia, LA
www.southernmutualhelp.org

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www.trac4la.com

Vermilion Faith Community of Care
Abbeville, LA

Zion Travelers Cooperative Center Inc.
Phoenix, LA
www.ziontcc.org

MISSISSIPPI

Back Bay Mission, Biloxi, MS
www.backbaymission.com

Center for Environmental and Economic Justice Inc., Biloxi, MS
www.envirojustice.com

Children's Defense Fund, Southern Regional Office, Jackson, MS
www.childrensdefense.org/sro

Coastal Women for Change, Biloxi, MS
www.cwcbiloxi.org

East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center, Biloxi, MS

Gulf Coast Latin American Association
Biloxi, MS

Hands on USA, Biloxi, MS
www.handsonusa.org

Main Street Missionary Baptist Church
Biloxi, MS
www.main-st-church.com

Mercy Housing and Human Development Inc., Gulfport, MS
www.mhhd.org

Mississippi Association of Cooperatives
Jackson, MS
www.mississippiassociation.coop

Mississippi Immigrants' Rights Alliance
Jackson, MS
www.yourmira.org

Moore Community House, Biloxi, MS
www.moorecommunityhouse.org

NAACP, MS State Conference
Jackson, MS
www.naacpms.org

National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies, Biloxi, MS
www.navasa.org

North Gulfport Community Land Trust
Gulfport, MS
www.ngclt.org

Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Biloxi, MS
www.fatima-biloxi.com

Steps Coalition, Biloxi, MS
www.stepscoalition.org

Turkey Creek Community Initiatives
Gulfport, MS
www.turkey-creek.org

Visions of Hope Inc., Biloxi, MS
www.visionsofhopeblx.org

REGIONAL

Farm Worker Association of Florida
Apopka, FL
www.farmworkers.org/fwafpage.html

Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, East Point, GA
www.federationsoutherncoop.com

NATIONAL

Catholic Charities USA, Alexandria, VA
www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

Institute for Southern Studies
Durham, NC
www.southernstudies.org

National Employment Law Project
New York, NY
www.nelp.org

National Family Farm Coalition
Washington, DC
www.nffc.net

National Low Income Housing Coalition
Washington, DC
www.nlihc.org

NeighborWorks, Washington, DC
www.nw.org

North Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations
Raleigh, NC
www.ncacdc.org

RAND Corporation
Santa Monica, CA
www.rand.org

ROC (Restaurant Opportunities Centers) United, New York, NY
www.rocunited.org

Lyrit Turner, 10, in the kitchen of her family's FEMA trailer in Louisiana. Lyrit will be entering the fifth grade in September and is the oldest of Darilyn Turner's daughters. The Turner family has been living in a trailer for three years but hopes to move into a mobile home soon.

I am America.

“We came in with bottled water, tents, and shovels and rakes. We didn’t sit back and wait on the government.”

FRONT: When Hurricane Katrina’s floodwaters receded, no more than 30 of the 166 homes in rural Phoenix, LA, were still habitable. But Phoenix is rising anew, thanks to the hard work and spirit of self-reliance that characterize this community. Following the storm, Rev. Tyrone Edwards (pictured left and cover) and other members of the Zion Travelers Baptist Church organized the Zion Travelers Cooperative Center to respond to local needs that were going unmet by the government. Using the labor of volunteers and community members, the center has already rebuilt or rehabbed 39 homes in less than three years.

Phoenix is just one example of what has been driving Gulf Coast recovery: not federal or state leadership but the people of the Gulf Coast themselves. This river town has moved along with its recovery in part because the community, right from the start, voiced its needs clearly and provided strong leadership. The cooperative center’s mission has always been one of action and hope. Its motto? “Let us arise and rebuild.”

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