

## **Organizing in Katrina's Wake**

### **By Kevin Whelan, ACORN Communications Director**

One thing was immediately clear as more than 300 people – mostly evacuees from New Orleans – packed a church near the Acres Home neighborhood of Houston on September 9<sup>th</sup> to discuss the Katrina crisis the former New Orleans residents, who had fled Katrina the week before, wanted to be called “survivors.” The Katrina Town Hall Meeting in organized by the local chapter of ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), was part of the survival plan.

ACORN was deeply and directly impacted by Katrina. The group's national headquarters is in New Orleans, and over 9,000 New Orleans families belong to the organization. In the days after the hurricane, ACORN members around the country witnessed the television images of people dying and desperate to make sense of what happened. They put their organizing skills to work with protests, meetings, call-ins and email campaigns demanding better relief. Members were quick to offer housing to displaced people, and ACORN staff reached out to find dislocated members – and each other –using text messages and the organization's website.

At the Houston meeting, a week into the crisis, rage and grief mixed with concerns over immediate needs and broader issues about the future of New Orleans. “I have been going through so much,” New Orleans ACORN member Joe Stafford told the crowd. “My father died of a heart attack as the flood was coming in – my mother stayed behind with him...but now is the time that I have to be strong for my kids, we all have to be strong.”

“I just want the councilman and everyone here to hear my side of the story. And my side of the story is that I think there could have been a better way to get us out of New Orleans. We want a voice in this rebuilding...I want to know what they're going to be doing with all that money.”

### **Forming a Movement**

The Houston Town Hall meeting jumpstarted a movement of Katrina survivors, organizing for better conditions in the cities where they have landed, and a voice in the future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

At the Houston event, Mayor Bill White, one of a number of elected officials in attendance, committed to provide “grocery cards” to families sheltering survivors, and to put a halt to evictions of families from motels – promises he delivered on the following week. In Dallas, by contrast, local ACORN members and survivors held joint press events and meetings to urge the city to agree to a partnership offered by FEMA to reimburse the city for providing temporary housing.

For other survivor organizations in Louisiana, the overwhelming focus has been getting back home as quickly as possible. Residents organizing in the small-to-medium-sized shelters in Baton Rouge, have pressed New Orleans city officials, members of Congress,

and FEMA for a right to return to their homes and neighborhoods. They see a combination of facts that point to a systematic effort to depopulate the lower Ninth Ward and other low income areas. They are leery of government failures that worsened the disaster and government plans to put temporary housing outside of New Orleans.

“Buses pull up at the shelters, asking people to leave for Las Vegas, Utah, or wherever,” says Tanya Harris, a New Orleans ACORN leader now living in a Baton Rouge shelter. “They promise us housing, jobs, a better life but how do you know? We are fighting to have the means that people do not have to get on those buses, but to stay and rebuild a life here. That means living wage jobs in the rebuilding and temporary housing in New Orleans, or as close as possible. In the meantime, we are trying to set up ways to keep in touch with those who do leave, so they can know when they can come back.”

The "Rebuild the Region" coalition of Louisiana, which includes ACORN, the Louisiana NAACP, the Louisiana AFL-CIO, UAW Local 1926, and SEIU Local 100, has developed an agenda demanding the conditions for a just and inclusive rebuilding, focused on living wage jobs with health and organizing rights and affordable housing. The group is planning a rally at the state capitol in October.

Congregation-based networks have also organized Katrina survivors, in coalition with others. PICO has been putting the stories of churches and church members affected by Katrina out in the public sphere alongside a detailed, social justice-oriented public policy agenda. The IAF has held meetings to build a “survivor’s organization” in Houston, building a platform around immediate needs and the rebuilding process.

### **A National Agenda**

In addition to sponsoring Town Hall Meetings, press events, lobby visits, and neighborhood petition drives in over 35 cities, ACORN has developed a “Proposal for the Hurricane Recovery and Rebuilding.” It emphasizes: living wage jobs and first-source hiring for survivors and residents; affordable housing and right of return for those dislocated; and public services that will allow families to live in safer communities. The organization has also called for an independent Katrina commission and fair treatment by sub-prime lenders, who have not offered displaced homeowners the same relief as banks.

During the week of September 19th, New Orleans ACORN leader Tanya Harris traveled to Washington DC, on behalf of ACORN and the Rebuild our Region Coalition. She represented Katrina survivors in meetings and forums with many senior congressional leaders, pushing for the right of survivors to have a say in the rebuilding process. Harris received a respectful and even enthusiastic welcome in many quarters. But influencing the rebuilding process – largely in the hands of the Bush administration and Republican leadership – will be a different matter, requiring much broader organizing and vigilance. The waters may be receding, but the real battle of New Orleans is still ahead.

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Learn more about ACORN's work at [www.acorn.org/katrina](http://www.acorn.org/katrina).

To support organizing and community organizations in the Gulf region:

Send tax-deductible checks to help **ACORN** recover, rebuild, and organize to: ACORN Institute - Hurricane Recovery and Rebuilding Fund, 739 8th Street SE, Washington, DC 20003 - or [donate online](http://www.acorn.org/donate) at [www.acorn.org/donate](http://www.acorn.org/donate) .

One of the oldest longstanding groups in the country doing anti-racist work is the **People's Institute for Survival and Beyond**, founded over 25 years ago in New Orleans by Ron Chisom and Jim Dunn. Their offices are gone, and they need money to rebuild and regroup. You can make your checks out to the People's Institute Survival and Beyond Fund. Mail your gift to Peoples Institute NYC, P.O. Box 250809, New York, NY 10025. Or you can make your secure contribution on line by visiting the People's Institute new website at [www.pisab.org](http://www.pisab.org).

**Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Reconstruction Project** is a broad-based coalition of labor and community organizations. The Relief Fund can receive donations through the Vanguard Foundation, 383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 301, San Francisco, CA 94103.

You can find out more about community responses to Katrina – and ways to help – at a new website by the Association for the Study and Development of Community at <http://capacitybuilding.net/Katrina/>