



Katrina Survivors Should Get Housing Not Federal Surveillance

By: Sangita Nayak, Policy and Communications Director at The Praxis Project and coordinator of the Katrina Information Network.

A report in late February this year, announced the launch of the first federally coordinated plan for Katrina survivors. It was not to coordinate housing, reunification or even identification of the many dead. The program, coordinated by the FBI, would enable police officers to increase and coordinate surveillance and monitoring of Katrina survivors nationwide

As we rapidly approach the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in August, federal coordination and support – particular for low-income survivors – have been limited. For example, agency coordination of housing and employment services is virtually non-existent. Thousands of units of subsidized housing go unutilized and survivors lose unemployment insurance because of stunted coordination with state and local governments. Trailers, hailed as the federal answer to the housing crisis, will do little to protect residents during this year's hurricane season. Those few lucky enough to get trailers were most often homeowners needing temporary space as they rebuild their property. Tens of thousands of displaced renters, if they ever get a trailer, now face trailer site bans by local jurisdictions. Most of these bans were passed shortly after the hurricane and were specifically designed to target survivors. Many now depend upon short-term hotel assistance, which has run out for most, leaving displaced survivors with few alternatives.

“Many months after the storm, we are still in the storm of neglect,” said Muriel Lewis of the National Association of Katrina Evacuees (NAKE), “Survivors are still living and dying in the streets.”

Over a 1,100 people have died and over 1,900 are still missing. The lack of public investment that led to this disaster – the neglect of the levee system, defunding of public health services, etc. – has been exacerbated by federal initiatives that prioritize surveillance over services. Now, with only weeks away from the start of hurricane season, levee reconstruction has yet to be fully funded placing all area housing at risk.

In countries with far less resources, disasters have been addressed more effectively. Tsunami efforts provide a poignant example. Aceh, a province in Indonesia that suffered the greatest loss of life and the most widespread destruction, had an international coordinated response. With the input of local community groups, they came up with a community supported plan for long-term housing that included reconstruction with escape routes and high points as part of the community's approach to disaster mitigation.



“At the time I thought this plan was too good to be true, because this is the first time where everything is planned: the width of the road, pavement, fishpond, the mosque, women’s center and schools,” said Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, the head of the Bureau of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency for Aceh and Nias, “Could this be real? But today, this is something real.”

With assistance from groups like World Vision and Oxfam, plans are underway for building 2,100 earthquake-resistant houses by the end of 2006 in Aceh, of which 700 were completed by December 2005. The location of the houses, and the first people to receive them, are identified by the community, with priority given to vulnerable families. The housing plans are also matched with “cash-for-work” plans to employ thousands of Aceh residents in the reconstruction and school creation. There is also an acknowledgement of loss of livelihoods in the rice fields, and an attempt to rebuild mangroves and repair the environment.

The long-term housing and basic needs plans in Aceh are a stark contrast to our federal response. With political will, real solutions for long-term housing can be realized for our nation’s Katrina survivors. Public housing could be made available immediately, along with an effort to eliminate rental price gouging. Housing and rebuilding services, including temporary housing, should comply with fair housing and labor standards. Those that evict survivors for profit should be penalized and prevented from access to federal contracts in the future. And there could be more community control of property decisions, like in Aceh.

The Advancement Project continues to call attention to the unfairness in housing and helps lead the fight for legal remedies in coalition with the Grassroots Legal Network. AP is also part of the Katrina Information Network (KIN), www.KatrinaAction.org which is pressuring Congress for a just recovery and nothing less. KIN is coordinated by The Praxis Project, and is led by survivors groups such as the National Association of Katrina Evacuees and the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, who are mobilizing thousands of survivors to counter agency mismanagement and neglect.

Please join survivor groups to get Katrina recovery efforts on track and support the hundreds of thousands who were displaced. Commit to a 30 second weekly action <join the email list at www.katrinaaction.org/joinourefforts > and see the latest postings on housing crisis and legal challenges at the Advancement Project, www.advancementproject.org