

## ***Katrina: Our System for Fixing Broken Lives is Broken***

The unrivaled impact of Hurricane Katrina is measured not only in dollars and cents, but in human lives. Untold thousands are feared dead, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced from their homes or have lost all of their earthly possessions.

Therefore, while contributing to the various relief funds is an essential element of our response to this national tragedy, money alone doesn't fix broken lives. What is needed is a human-based response that outlives the news media's attention to the Gulf States and addresses the less obvious, but no less significant challenges created by the devastation.

If the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks are any indication, two things will surely occur in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. First, our emergency response preparedness will be dissected. Second, the American people will respond with characteristic generosity to meet the immediate needs of those affected. Each response is important, but each is ultimately predictable and insufficient.

The assessment of our emergency response capabilities will likely be politicized and polarized, yielding changes only at the margins. And while the immediate response from people shows our immense capacity to care, it will not change the desperate conditions in which hundreds of thousands of people in the Gulf States, and millions of Americans elsewhere, live each day.

What America needs to do now—not only in response to Hurricane Katrina, but in addressing the longstanding challenges facing communities nationwide—is to think and act beyond the traditional stimulus-response formula to serving those in need. Hurricane Katrina has arrested the nation's attention, while leading to a spike in fund raising for numerous charities. Yet, if a similar tragedy were to befall New Orleans in ten years, would the human anguish still fracture along the same racial and socioeconomic lines?

The current delivery system for relief and social services is heroic but clearly inadequate. A new system, based on the principles described below, constitutes America's best course of action for having a long-term, positive impact on those in need.

- Adopt a human-based approach. Contrary to the system- or institution-based approach, which often results in bureaucratic gridlock because agencies require clients to conform to their individual intake and service systems, the human-based approach caters to the needs of the affected person. The customer-first principle is a hallmark of successful companies, but remains a stubborn challenge for public and private agencies.

- Operate from a master plan. Community leaders need to develop a comprehensive plan to serve all Gulf State evacuees in any community that has accepted them. The elements of this plan will cover a broad scope of services ranging from crisis counseling, housing and daycare to cash assistance, education and job training. This same comprehensive approach is no less valid for communities seeking to eradicate teen pregnancy, drug use or illiteracy.
- Integrate the delivery of services. Hurricane Katrina offers a compelling microcosm of the need for a single source of information regarding relief services. 2-1-1, a toll-free phone number that citizens can use to access essential services and volunteer opportunities, exists in Louisiana and now serves as the state's primary clearing house for requests for assistance and has accepted thousands of calls. Conversely, Mississippi, which lacks a 2-1-1 system, doesn't have a coordinated, statewide means of managing such requests. With 2-1-1 operating in less than half of the country, Congress should enact legislation and provide funding to establish an integrated nationwide 2-1-1 network that would allow service providers to seamlessly help those in need – regardless of where they are physically located.
- Stay committed to a community's long-term needs. In the last few months, when is the last time you encountered a news article about the rebuilding efforts in those Southeast Asian countries affected by the last year's tsunami, despite the fact that these efforts will take years to complete? We need to resist the temptation to shape programs and deploy resources based on the day's headline and remember that mental health counselors were getting new requests for service seven years after the bombing in Oklahoma City. This points to the need for agencies to set long-term goals and make the necessary commitments to achieve them.
- Create a \$10 billion Human Development Fund. We will pour billions of dollars into rebuilding the physical infrastructure of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but let's also invest billions in rebuilding human lives through the creation of mixed income housing communities and neighborhoods; the creation of jobs that pay enough to sustain a family; and the placement of services like grocery stores in all neighborhoods. Let's create family development accounts for college and home ownership; neighborhood redevelopment accounts that provide incentives to establish small businesses in challenged areas; and quality early education and education support services that includes the building of YMCA's attached to public schools to better serve kids and their families.

While the human cost of Hurricane Katrina is ultimately incalculable, what is acutely apparent is that rebuilding the Gulf States will require a historic concentration of diverse resources spread across many years. Successfully managing an effort of such scale will require a measure of precision, coordination and commitment that our current delivery system simply cannot accommodate. With the wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of people hanging in the balance, isn't it time that America forged a new and better way of serving those in need?

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