

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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Responding to Homelessness in Katrina's Wake

Sign-On Statement

Hurricane Katrina dramatically increased homelessness in the United States. As this issue of the *Mobilizer* is prepared, Hurricane Rita threatens more of the same. The issues that these natural disasters have revealed to the world are the familiar problems of homelessness: dire poverty, too little housing, debilitating illnesses, lack of health insurance, racial injustice.

Believing that short-term, emergency responses are inadequate to the scope of these problems, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council has collaborated with other organizations to draft the statement that appears on the following three pages. The statement calls on our nation to end *all* homelessness through these measures.

- Guarantee access to affordable housing
- Guarantee comprehensive health insurance for all Americans
- Create living wage jobs indexed to the local cost of housing
- Elevate disability assistance programs to living wage levels
- Enhance the capacity of homeless service agencies to provide Katrina-related relief
- Ensure the involvement of displaced individuals in reconstruction efforts

We invite other service and advocacy organizations to endorse the statement, or to adapt it as you see fit and use it in your own education and organizing.

President Bush: Empty the Shelters by October 15

In his televised speech from New Orleans this week, President Bush expressed an intention to empty the shelters by October 15. Sadly, the supply of housing in America is not sufficient to absorb all those displaced by Katrina, and shelters will be burgeoning for some time to come. In fact, America's emergency shelters have been full for two decades already, and Americans sleep on the streets. *All* the shelters should be emptied, and *can* be emptied by October 15 one year from now, in 2006, if this nation turns its vast resources toward assuring the human right to housing.

ACTION:

- Add your organization's endorsement to the statement below by e-mailing council@nhchc.org. The statement and all endorsements will be posted at www.nhchc.org, and will be used to communicate the urgent need for new policy directions in our country.
- Send the following message to President Bush at president@whitehouse.gov :
You have called for all Katrina evacuees living in emergency shelters to be housed by October 15th. The three million Americans who were homeless before Katrina arrived deserve no less. Please devote sufficient resources to empty the shelters and secure permanent, affordable housing for all of our neighbors by October 15, 2006.

SUBSCRIBE TO THE HCH MOBILIZER BY E-MAILING council@nhchc.org

Responding to Homelessness in Katrina's Wake

A Joint Statement of Service & Advocacy Organizations

The undersigned organizations working to end homelessness in America lament the tremendous destruction, suffering, and loss of life along the Gulf Coast. Our thoughts are with all those struggling in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, including our many devastated member organizations, local chapters, and community partners. We are moved by the generosity and leadership of homeless service and advocacy organizations readily bearing additional burdens to attend to the needs of those left homeless by the storm. We are compelled to advance a national strategy not only to end the homelessness of Katrina evacuees, but to end *all* homelessness.

As we have learned from our collective work to address homelessness over the past quarter century, relief alone is never enough; permanent structural solutions must accompany this emergency intervention. In many ways, the deadly winds of Hurricane Katrina exposed what already existed beneath the surface – the inequality and injustice which spawn mass homelessness. Many of the individuals and families most devastated in the wake of Katrina have much in common with the three million Americans who experience homelessness throughout the nation each year. They are victims of economic crises, affordable housing shortages, personal health emergencies, health system dysfunction, and other on-going disasters. Those left homeless by Katrina require more than emergency medical care, temporary emergency shelter, and short-term financial assistance; to cope with current and future natural, economic, or personal hurricanes, they need certain basic resources – comprehensive health insurance, permanent affordable housing, and living wage employment. These same resources are required to end the homelessness of all Americans, and should be available as a matter of right.

Hurricane Katrina should become our inspiration for a nation that values all its residents, not just in word, but in deed. Housing, not shelter; health insurance, not indigent care clinics; a living wage, not the minimum wage: these are the principles that must form a new foundation for social justice in America. The undersigned organizations call for the following measures to create greater economic justice, diminish human suffering, and promote human rights. Taken together, these strategies will markedly reduce the incidence of homelessness along the Gulf Coast and throughout the country, lay the groundwork for an adequate national response to natural, economic, and personal emergencies, and animate on-going social policy reform in the United States.

1. **Guarantee access to affordable housing:** Homeless Americans, including low-income hurricane evacuees, fundamentally require permanent housing they can afford. Given the inadequacy of existing affordable housing stock, *we call upon the Congress to immediately establish a National Housing Trust Fund to create 1.5 million new units of affordable housing with a special emphasis on housing affordable for households at 30% of area median income and those at or below the Federal poverty line.* Any new production program should supplement significant increases in existing HUD and USDA housing programs. Without new permanent housing resources, the hurricane will result in the unacceptable permanent expansion of the emergency shelter system. Enactment of a National Housing Trust Fund is a significant step toward fulfilling the goal of providing

decent and affordable housing for all Americans¹ and toward ending homelessness altogether.

2. **Guarantee comprehensive health insurance for all Americans:** The health care safety net can no more absorb newly displaced persons than it could respond fully to the 45.8 million Americans who were uninsured on the day Katrina struck. The extraordinary efforts to provide health care in the wake of the storm – regardless of insurance status – are emblematic of an understanding that health care must be extended to everyone. *We call upon the Congress to enact comprehensive health insurance for all Americans.* The grotesque inefficiencies and inequities of the current health care system create homelessness and can be remedied only by assuring health insurance for everyone.
3. **Create living wage jobs indexed to the local cost of housing:** Everyone who works should be paid at a level that allows him/her to rent or purchase decent housing. Given the massive elimination of employment opportunities along the Gulf Coast and given the shortage of living-wage jobs throughout the country, *we call upon the Congress to enact policies that ensure sufficient living wage employment for Katrina evacuees and for all Americans able to work, so that they are able to afford housing; construction of new housing must be among the activities promoted by such policies.* *We call on the Congress to immediately increase the minimum wage to living wage levels.* *We call upon the private sector in the Gulf Coast and throughout the country to provide wages adequate to prevent the homelessness of their employees.* The creation of meaningful, living-wage employment opportunities is essential to end the homelessness of all Americans, including Katrina evacuees. We recognize the centrality of quality, free, egalitarian public education for the development of a democratic society and a productive work force.
4. **Elevate disability assistance programs to living wage levels:** People who are medically certified as unable to work should not be condemned to a life of homelessness; and yet the benefit levels of federal and state disability programs are insufficient to afford market rate housing in any community throughout the country. Given the number of people with disabilities devastated by Katrina and left homeless nationally, *we call upon Congress to ensure that enrollees in federal disability assistance programs – including Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and the Supplemental Security Program (SSI) – receive a benefit level consistent with the local cost of housing.* Ensuring an adequate financial safety net for low-income people with disabilities is necessary to end and prevent the homelessness of these vulnerable Americans.
5. **Enhance the capacity of homeless service agencies to provide Katrina-related relief:** Though we insist upon long-term policy changes that will eliminate the need for a homeless service system, we also recognize that a number of emergency response measures will be required to ameliorate suffering caused by Katrina. Programs that exist to serve homeless people are deeply involved in recovery efforts, and will surely see large increases in demand from the surge of new homelessness created by the storm. Robust responses to physical ailments, to the consequences of traumatic stress, and to the immediate need for shelter, housing, food and clothing are essential. It is crucial that Katrina-related relief not divert resources from previously-existing homeless relief efforts; indeed, as new resources are created for persons rendered homeless by Katrina,

¹ United States Housing Act of 1937 as Amended by the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998, Title I Section 2

they must be accessible to *all* who are homeless. *We call upon the Congress to increase appropriations necessary to enhance the capacity of homeless service providers.* These emergency response measures must not become part of a permanent national infrastructure but should only exist until such time that Katrina evacuees and other low-income Americans are guaranteed access to housing, health care, living wage employment, and adequate disability assistance.

- 6. Ensure the involvement of displaced individuals in reconstruction efforts:** As the Gulf Coast rebuilds and as the nation endeavors to eliminate the underlying conditions responsible for homelessness, people displaced by Katrina and other people experiencing homelessness must be allowed to choose where they will live and must be integrally involved in reconstruction and reformation efforts. *We call upon the Congress to ensure that Katrina evacuees are involved in the formal planning processes for Gulf Coast reconstruction, that evacuees be given employment opportunities created in rebuilding the area, and that homeless individuals throughout the country are meaningfully involved in efforts to end homelessness.* People with the experience of homelessness – including those left homeless by Katrina – are most aware of their current and future needs. Recovery and reformation efforts in the wake of the storm must involve the individuals whose lives are most fundamentally altered by the experience of homelessness.

May this horrible disaster stimulate us to end *all* homelessness in this country.

Endorsed by:

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council, Nashville TN

We invite other organizations to add your endorsements by e-mailing council@nhhc.org. This statement and organizational endorsements will be posted at www.nhhc.org