

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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Protect the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons

A Human Rights Perspective on Katrina and Homelessness

A million or more Americans lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina, and most are still displaced. Although communities across the country warmly embraced the victims of Katrina in the immediate aftermath of the storm, media reports suggest that the welcome has worn thin as the evacuees have strained services and housing, and promised Federal assistance has not fully materialized.

The International Perspective

The plight of Katrina refugees is not unlike the situation of many other people across the globe who have been displaced within the borders of their own countries by natural disasters, lawless violence and government action. The United Nations defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence” by causes including “natural or human-made disasters.”

By that clear definition, anyone uprooted by the hurricane should be classified as an IDP and accordingly provided with appropriate emergency assistance. The UN’s *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* state that this aid should minimally include access to housing, essential medical services, food and potable water, education, and clothing. Although the *Guiding Principles* are not legally binding, the U.S. Agency on International Development (USAID) called them “a useful tool and framework” in 2004 and has consistently applied them when assisting IDPs abroad.

The Plight of Displaced Persons

USAID advocates that “IDPs should be granted the full security and protection provided under applicable norms of international human rights laws, international humanitarian law and national law.” Displaced persons within our own borders (and the people providing them refuge) deserve no lesser assurances than these. However, in cities such as Atlanta, Baton Rouge, and especially Houston – where populations soared after Katrina – emergency Federal aid has been slow to replace diminishing local resources. Consequently, crime rates are elevated, emergency medical services are stretched beyond capacity, schools are tense and crowded, and housing resources are exhausted. As time limits for federal housing assistance for Katrina’s refugees begin to expire, many have no home, no job, and little prospect but crowding once again into emergency shelters. The human rights of many American IDPs require enforcement.

Human-Made Disasters

Millions of Americans who are rendered homeless each year by a disastrous job market, and by public policies that are actually *reducing* the availability of housing for poor people and *increasing* the ranks of those without health insurance. These conditions are a “human-made disaster” and their homeless victims deserve the same rights and protections as all other IDPs.

ACTION

The National Council renews its call for universal solutions that will protect the rights of *all* internally displaced persons: national health insurance, affordable housing, and living wages.

We urge *Mobilizer* readers to learn about and participate in human rights advocacy through the following easy action step:

- **Sign the [petition](#) of the U.S. Human Rights Network today!** Join other human rights advocates to recognize displaced Katrina victims as IDPs and demand their appropriate treatment. Read more about this campaign and follow links to other resources at <http://www.ushrnetwork.org/page209.cfm>. Organizations interested in endorsing should e-mail katrina@ushrnetwork.org. For more information, contact the Council’s Health Policy Specialist at djohnson@hchmd.org or 410/837-5533 ext. 395.

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