

Katrina's Winds

Yesterday, a woman came to Health Care for the Homeless with little more than the shirt on her back. She had lost everything – her housing, job, health, and family. She had no food, no clean clothing, and no place to go.

No, she wasn't a Gulf Coast evacuee. Though displaced, she wasn't eligible for emergency intervention or financial assistance. She languished behind nearly 14,000 people on housing waiting lists, and repeated calls to over-crowded emergency shelters confirmed that she would spend the night, again, on the streets.

Unfortunately for her, she was just another of the 3,000 Baltimoreans who will find themselves homeless tonight – victims of economic crises, affordable housing shortages, personal health emergencies, and other on-going disasters. No celebrities will arrive to plead her case. No officials will assure her that help is on the way. The nation's call to end *her* homelessness, issued in earnest in the 1980s, has long since faded into barely perceptible background noise.

It is indeed tragic that it took a hurricane to expose the inequality upon which contemporary America is constructed. Nonetheless, this tragedy may be balanced by the opportunity before us to seriously examine the fundamental causes of homelessness and the growing rift between the privileged (those able to flee the storm) and the poor (those who couldn't). More than a million Gulf Coast residents – privileged *or* poor – now join the three million low-income Americans who know the total devastation that accompanies homelessness. As Peoples Bank of Biloxi's President Chevis Swetman reflected from the bank's conference room where he temporarily lives with his family: “. . . I can now relate to the homeless that I might not have ever been able to relate to before.”

One wouldn't wish the devastation of Katrina on anyone; yet, imagine if our policy makers were hurricane survivors. Judging from Mr. Swetman's insight, it is doubtful they'd recommend divisive policies – long enforced in Baltimore and elsewhere – that give housing priority only to those displaced by so-called “no fault” disasters like hurricanes while denying such priority to a woman who lost her job at the factory or a man whose schizophrenia precludes employment. These invidious distinctions are unfortunately continued by HUD's announcement that 5,600 vacant public housing units within 500 miles of the Gulf Coast are being provided to evacuees. Why were these units vacant when thousands of families in this area were bereft of housing prior to the hurricane?

Similarly, one reads in *The Sun's* editorial pages that 236 vacant local public housing units are being provided to Gulf Coast evacuees. Five times this number of women, children, and men are sleeping in emergency shelters in Baltimore tonight. While it is absolutely appropriate to provide assistance to storm victims, Baltimore's homeless

families require the same resources and emergency intervention that homeless Katrina evacuees deserve.

In a recent televised address, President Bush declared that “our goal is to get people out of the shelters by the middle of October.” He was referring, of course, to the temporary facilities housing Katrina evacuees. But imagine if instead he had drawn upon the horrible experience in the Gulf Coast to declare a national priority to empty *all* the nation’s shelters by the middle of next month, to move people into permanent affordable housing, to create jobs paying enough to prevent the experience of homelessness, to provide access to health care not just during times of national crisis but to withstand any personal emergency.

Imagine a vision which rejects the categories of the Katrina poor and the non-Katrina poor, of the “worthy” and “less worthy.” This vision seizes the opportunity to end homelessness whatever the cause. Vision doesn’t immediately require the resources to implement it. Vision can acknowledge the difficult decisions to be made along the way. But vision looks beyond the superficial fissures made visible by Katrina and refuses to evaluate which homeless person has it worse. Vision helps all of us – rich or poor, housed or homeless – see a better opportunity at the end of devastation, whether the proximate cause is a hurricane, lack of health insurance, a mental illness, or the dearth of affordable housing.

The Katrina experience demands the kind of local and national leadership that seeks common ground for all Americans in the face of disaster for any. If the President of a Bank in Biloxi, preoccupied though he must be with the destruction of his business and the dislocation of his family, can summon from the depths of this tragedy the strength to relate to homeless Americans throughout the country, there’s simply no limit to the reformation possible in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. May her winds uproot our acceptance of the homelessness of our neighbors, reorganize our local and national priorities, and grant us the vision necessary to empty the country’s shelters – for good.

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