

Real Relief For Katrina Survivors And Others

In Need Means Justice, Not Charity

By: Corlita Mahr

For millions of us living in America, this year's holiday season does not bring much in the way of cheer. The heightened consumerism and commercialized sentimentality linked with home and hearth only bring into sharp focus the painful contrast of living poor and displaced in the USA.

Thanks to deeper cuts in social programs, what little safety net left after Reaganomics has been torn to shreds. Millions of men, women and children continue to fail through the ever-widening cracks. Some of us are veterans and disabled—aging men from wars decades ago and young, mostly poor, working-class men of color more recently disabled by combat in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of us are displaced by the tragic management of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Many more of us cannot point to any specific tragedy. It may have started when the schools were de-funded and ill-equipped to prepare us for jobs, or when the jobs moved offshore, or when a family member got sick and we did not have enough insurance to cover mounting bills. However we got here, we are all on the rooftops now watching the floodwaters of poverty and neglect, consume our lives.

As a survivor of Katrina displaced from New Orleans, I am acutely aware that what little attention there is on issues of poverty is focused on hurricane survivors. People who have been waiting for housing and other services for years are now pitted against newcomers displaced by the hurricane. Under the current rules, there's just not enough to go around—unless you are already rich. If your million-dollar home slides down the Malibu Hills for the fifth time in 10 years or you live in a predominantly White community in the Gulf, then you get a completely different set of government rules.

This has to change.

Hurricane survivors are organizing with others abandoned by the government to fight together—not each other—for new policies and services to address poverty and displacement. As survivors, we want justice, not charity. We need inclusion for the hundreds of thousands of African Americans and others from marginalized communities that have been shut out of the rebuilding process, a real safety net that puts an end to Gulf area evictions, mortgage support and a victims' compensation fund.

Yet, our vision is much larger than that because we know that, in order to gain justice for survivors, we need justice for all of us.

Hurricane Katrina exposed how the erosion of public infrastructure—hospitals, schools, public safety and social services—can endanger lives. Trends in Congress and at the state level will only make things worse, unless we come together and make them turn things around.

On Dec. 10, survivors and others of goodwill took our issues to the streets in a march on New Orleans. The march was one of many efforts to demand fairness in the rebuilding process and new policies to expand the public safety net and expand opportunities for all of us washed away by public abandonment and neglect. Of course, this fight did not start with Katrina nor will it end with this march. This effort is part of centuries of struggle to rebuild an America that honors its promise of "freedom and justice for all."

If you could not join us in New Orleans, there is still much you can do to help. Find out how you can support local organizing efforts on the Web at www.katrinaaction.org. Call your elected representatives and demand that they do all they can to stop the funding cuts and to be a part of a just rebuilding effort. Better still, drop by their offices while they are in town for the holiday recess and have the conversation in person with them or their staff.

Toy giveaways, free turkeys and warm clothing are nice, even necessary—but they cannot address the real challenges inherent in bad policies and unequal infrastructure. Saint Augustine once wrote, "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."

This holiday season, commit to be a part of efforts to address justice withheld from tens of thousands of Katrina survivors and many others left stranded by poverty, war and displacement. Turn your outrage to action and join the millions of us who say to the government, to the companies profiting from our loss, to those who would rather look away, "Never again."

(Corlita Mahr is a displaced resident of New Orleans. She is the coordinator for People's Hurricane Relief Fund communications.)

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