

COMMENTARY

**Wanted: A Game Plan for Human Recovery
from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Other Disasters
By Raymond A. Jetson**

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Hurricane Katrina destroys thousands of homes, hospitals, schools, churches, and businesses on the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast. This ruthless hurricane is considered the worst natural disaster in the history of our country. Entire cities and neighborhoods crumble to the unstoppable forces of wind and water.

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Less than one month later, Hurricane Rita bears down on the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast, causing the largest mass exodus in the history of America with almost 3 million people jamming freeways to evacuate from the Galveston-Houston metropolitan area. Hurricane Rita also wipes out entire cities and townships.

For many people of Louisiana and the rest of our nation, these dates will be as indelibly etched in memory as are December 7 and September 11. For people of Louisiana and surrounding states, the negative effects of these two hurricanes were *and still are* comparable to those of an air raid and terrorist attack. More than 200,000 homes were destroyed in Louisiana alone. Almost 1,500 people were left dead, and more than half a million Louisianans were displaced. Those are staggering statistics for a state with a pre-storm population of about 4.5 million.

Two years later, what progress has been made toward recovery? For some, quite a lot. For others, very little.

Although these hurricanes did not discriminate against age, race, religion, income level, or economic class, the one-two punch of these back-to-back storms has been too much for many Louisiana families. And although some progress has been made in the past two years to rebuild homes, bridges, buildings, hospitals and schools in this hurricane-ravaged state, human recovery efforts have only scratched the surface and have a long way to go.

Housing, jobs, education and transportation remain elusive for almost 10,000 Louisiana households who have been living in trailer communities. According to FEMA as of mid-July 2007, 42,939 households were still living in FEMA trailers, of which 34,285 were living in trailers on private property. About 20 percent live in a trailer

community managed by FEMA throughout the state of Louisiana, with the largest concentration (48 percent) in Orleans Parish.

Recent news reports indicate that people living in FEMA trailers are actually getting sicker, allegedly due to the chemicals used in manufacturing these temporary shelters.

A door-to-door survey of Hurricane Katrina and Rita evacuees living in FEMA trailer parks that was commissioned by the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps and two other organizations yielded interesting preliminary findings in April 2007:

- Approximately 29 percent owned their residence prior to these hurricanes.
- 55 percent were employed full-time prior to the hurricanes.
- Two out of three respondents interviewed were not currently employed.
- About two-thirds would be willing to commute to work in New Orleans if transportation were available.
- Almost half of all respondents reported being in worse health now than the day before either hurricane.
- An analysis of seven key factors indicated a high degree of depression among respondents.

Furthermore, statistics from the International Medical Corps indicate that among displaced households in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, 50 percent meet criteria for serious depressive disorder; 40 percent reported at least a 20-minute drive to the nearest health facility; 14 percent reported increased substance abuse; and 25 percent reported that their children were newly exposed to drugs or alcohol since being displaced because of these hurricanes.

Human recovery is much more than rebuilding a physical structure. It's much more about rebuilding the lives of people. Disaster-affected families need affordable housing in a stable environment. Healthcare, education, childcare, jobs and transportation are critical to the recovery of individuals and families.

Because of the intricate psychological, emotional, physical and financial facets of human recovery, the needs of disaster-affected people are far beyond the capacity of many existing social service and governmental entities to address those needs adequately or quickly. To make a difference sooner and more effectively, existing service providers must tap into their knowledge, experience and financial resources to provide new and creative ways for families and individuals to make full recovery a reality. Ideally, policy makers, elected officials, service providers and advocates for these disaster survivors and the survivors themselves should unite to coordinate and optimize recovery efforts now and in the future.

Red tape, excuses and blame don't matter much to people who want to work, be in a place they can call home, or put their kids in school. More disasters will strike, and we have an opportunity to create a superior model for disaster management and recovery response from the lessons that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are teaching us.

Clearly, recovery has yet to begin for thousands of people affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Even though insurance payments, Road Home and FEMA have helped many to begin a process of resuming some sense of normalcy and pursuing a better quality of life, the disparity between these resources and those needed to help storm victims to fully recover remains great. Many working families still need financial assistance to reestablish their households, and those whose pre-storm situation was already challenging face an even tougher and longer journey to recovery. Many families worry about access to available and affordable housing. Many of them are concerned that they may never get to move back into any place that looks or feels like home again.

We need a game plan for human recovery for survivors of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and other disasters of similar magnitude. We can all do more collectively as a nation and as concerned citizens to deliver what's needed to assist survivors of these tragic hurricanes to re-establish a household and get back to the business of a life that could be better than it was before. What we can do is develop a cohesive partnership among local, state and federal government agencies, non-governmental organizations, private industry and the survivors of disaster themselves. The partnership's charter would be to eliminate bureaucracy and blame while also addressing the complex issues of human recovery -- real-time, near-term and far into the future.

More important, we can choose to be long-term investors and stakeholders in improving the quality of life and emotional wellbeing of thousands of men, women and children from south Louisiana and throughout the Gulf Coast region who need a jump start to recover. Even two years later and for years to come, we can continue to contribute to help thousands of our fellow Americans to rebound from the knock out blows wielded by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Raymond A. Jetson is the chief executive officer of the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps, a non-profit organization based in Baton Rouge, La., that was formed in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to address the personal needs of Louisiana individuals and families. Jetson also served as the past deputy secretary, assistant secretary and chief advisor for the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals from 1999 to 2006. He also was a representative in the Louisiana Legislature for the 61st District of the Louisiana House of Representatives from 1984 to 1999.

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