

“To confront these challenges we have to understand that Katrina may have battered these shores – but it also exposed silent storms that have ravaged parts of this city and our country for far too long.

The storms of poverty and joblessness; inequality and injustice. ...

The words ‘never again’ – spoken so often in those weeks after Katrina – must not fade to a whisper.”

– President-elect Obama, February 7, 2008

The Problem

In the three years since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita bore down on the Gulf Coast, another tragedy has unfolded in the region. Although the force of the storms was an act of nature, what the American people have since witnessed—an uneven and often incompetent recovery effort—are the results of deliberate human acts. Two fundamental indicators, housing and jobs, provide stark proof of the stalled recovery. Full recovery is possible only when affordable homes are coupled with secure, decent jobs. Without quality jobs and affordable housing, low and moderate income families are unable to return to their former lives. Decent wages allow people to return home and recreate vibrant communities by providing the necessary workforce to rebuild the region.

Affordable housing is not being rebuilt at the scale or pace needed, and wages are not keeping up with increased housing costs: communities of color and low-income people are being disproportionately affected. There are no plans to repair or replace almost half of the affordable apartments destroyed by the storms. Despite real need, more than 30,000 low-income homeowners are ineligible for rebuilding assistance and tens of thousands more have not received the level of assistance needed to rebuild their homes. Simultaneously, the workers desperately needed to rebuild the region and jump-start its economy cannot find decent jobs that pay enough to keep pace with the increased cost of living.

Overcoming a disaster of this scale cannot be solved by private initiative alone, nor is it just a local matter. Committed leadership at the state and federal level is needed. When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed long-standing inequities within the US, President Bush promised “to confront this poverty with bold action.” Yet after three long years, many people on the Gulf Coast still lack homes and jobs. The next President of the United States must guarantee a just, equitable and complete recovery.

Short-term Recommendations – First 100 Days

- *Coordinate recovery efforts*

In his January speech to New Orleans residents, Senator Obama promised to revamp the Office for Gulf Coast Recovery and Rebuilding, ensuring that the Recovery Coordinator answer directly to the President. In his first 100 days, the President should issue an executive order to do just that. [*Draft Executive Order available at www.oxfamamerica.org/transition*]

- *Review homeowner grants*

Review for adequacy Gulf Coast homeowner recovery grants and commit to ensuring additional funds where needed to rebuild.

- *Ensure that all people can protect themselves during a disaster*

Institutionalize announcements by the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that immigrants not face threats of deportation during evacuation and recovery from disasters.

The President should also commit to working with Congress to enact legislation to:

- ***Ensure that all federally subsidized housing is reopened or replaced***
Ensure that all families displaced from subsidized housing can return. This means either (1) Providing the resources necessary to ensure that all federally subsidized housing in the Gulf Coast is repaired and reopened; or (2) in cases where developments have been demolished—that every affordable unit is replaced at a level affordable to its previous tenants.
- ***Provide funds to create additional affordable rental housing***
Work with Congress to appropriate funds for accessible, affordable housing through the Section 811 (housing for the disabled) and Section 202 (housing for the elderly) programs to meet the needs of those who often face the greatest challenges to recovery. Provide five years' additional Low Income Housing Tax Credits to affected states to allow greater progress towards meeting storm-exacerbated housing needs.
- ***Reform the Stafford Act***
Enact a series of housing-related Stafford Act revisions to ensure that the provision of post-disaster shelter and temporary housing is accessible and fair. [Detailed suggested revisions *available at www.oxfamamerica.org/transition*]
- ***Prevent discrimination***
HUD and the Department of Justice should monitor communities' attempts to block the rebuilding of affordable rental housing through zoning restrictions and other means. Tie municipal and county receipt of CDBG or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds to federal requirements to remove barriers to affordable housing and discourage discrimination.
- ***End abuses of guest workers***
Commit to ending labor abuses under the existing H2B nonagricultural guest worker program. Stronger oversight requires (1) stepped up on-site inspections for safety and health violations, (2) elimination of recruitment fees, and (3) compliance with requirements that no local workers are available and that prevailing wages are paid.
- ***Ensure compliance with labor laws***
Reform federal agencies that are responsible for enforcing wage, hour, health, and safety laws so that they actively enforce existing labor laws during reconstruction. Commit to ensuring that existing protections, such as those in the Davis Bacon Act, aren't abrogated during a disaster.
- ***Create good jobs***
Work with Congress to enact legislation that develops the skills of the Gulf Coast workforce and creates jobs that pay living wages.
- ***Review and reform the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)***
Revise the FLSA in order to make general contractors responsible for violations of law committed by subcontractors.

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Working together to end poverty and injustice

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