

Responsible Relocation Real Opportunities for Families Displaced by Katrina

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Images from the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center, and now from temporary shelters in cities across the country, provide stark evidence of the poverty, ill health, and vulnerability of African-American families who lived in New Orleans's most distressed neighborhoods. Long before Katrina, these families were already suffering from the dire consequences of living in concentrated poverty—crime and violence, failing schools, bad health, few jobs, and unreliable public services.

Now these unfortunate families have been swept into chaotic shelters or are doubling up with family, friends, or volunteers in unfamiliar cities. But what they need is permanent housing—a secure and affordable place to live as they get their kids back to school, begin looking for work, and start rebuilding some semblance of normal life.

President Bush has promised a massive federal effort to help Katrina's victims rebuild their lives and to address the poverty and racial segregation that were made so visible to the world. But the administration's immediate response to the need for housing has been to ask local authorities to make vacant public housing units available, and to order 100,000 mobile homes for "villages" to be erected in rural Louisiana and Mississippi.

These approaches would reinforce existing poverty clusters and create new ones, isolating poor families rather than linking them to the jobs and other opportunities they so urgently need. We know how to do better.

The administration's focus should be on emergency housing vouchers, such as those proposed by Maryland Senator Paul Sarbanes, that families displaced by Katrina can use to pay for decent rental housing in the private market. This kind of responsible relocation has a precedent; after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, Congress funded 10,000 emergency housing vouchers and the Department of Housing and Urban Development took the lead in helping eligible families move into secure homes and apartments in decent neighborhoods.

And we've learned more since 1994 about how to help the most vulnerable families make the most of housing vouchers. Many families can succeed without extra government assistance; they receive a voucher, find a qualifying house or apartment, and get on with their lives. But for families with lots of kids, with health problems, with disabled family members, or without cars or driver's licenses, searching for housing in an unfamiliar city is much harder.

Without support, many Katrina evacuees will likely end up in profoundly poor neighborhoods where vacancy rates are high and landlords are eager to accept housing vouchers. These neighborhoods don't offer the safety and security, the social services and networks, or the job access that families need to start fresh.

But if families receive hands-on assistance with their housing search—along with basic support and counseling to help them find jobs, arrange for child care, and obtain medical attention—a housing voucher can open up opportunities for stability, security, and economic advancement.

Recent research shows that moving to a less poor neighborhood brings safety, improved mental health, better schools, and the potential for a brighter future. Even families facing serious life challenges can make such moves with help.

Now is the time to build on the past decade's experience with initiatives using vouchers and counseling services effectively to help extremely low income families improve their lives. Many of the displaced residents from the poorest and most distressed neighborhoods of New Orleans were desperate on a good day; this is a moment to provide them with real opportunity to find not just decent shelter but new opportunities for themselves and their children.

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