

**Prepared Testimony of Ms. Stephanie Mingo before the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity: "Status of the Big Four, Four Years After Hurricane Katrina."**

**Friday, August 21, 2009**

**Lawless Memorial Chapel, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana**

My name is Stephanie Mingo. I was born in New Orleans at Charity Hospital and raised in the St. Bernard public housing development. My mother was raised in St. Bernard and lived there with my father until Katrina. My grandmother lived in the St. Bernard, and one was one its first tenants when it opened. I am the face of public housing, as well as public health care, and public schooling, and I am proud to be a citizen of New Orleans. I work for the Orleans Parish School Board. I have four kids, and a grand baby. I have been an organizer for the rights of working class New Orleanians since long before the storm. I am not an employee of any nonprofit organization. I do not get paid for any of my efforts to improve public and low-income housing. I do it because I am of the community, and I want to pass on a better city to my children and grandchildren. I currently reside in the Iberville housing development with my family. Iberville is the only whole-standing public housing site in New Orleans. What I will address here today are the major issues facing public housing residents as we see them from the community's standpoint.

First let me clarify some major issues. Your committee is inquiring on the "current status of the Big Four developments." The main issue is not the developments, if by that you mean the buildings, the land, or the plans. The main issue since Katrina has been *the people*. The status of our people, those of us who used to live in the St. Bernard, BW Cooper, Lafitte, and CJ Peete is damaged. The closure of public housing and its demolition dealt a catastrophic blow to us. Let me be clear; the hurricane was a disaster, from which recovery was possible. Closing down and demolishing the Big Four was a catastrophe, and it's hard to tell if our communities will ever recover. We are trying to.

Public housing residents have been chronically displaced since Katrina, due entirely to political decisions made by HUD and the Housing Authority. Displacement has involved not just a geographic distance from our home town, but isolation from one another. Our bonds have been shattered and we have struggled enormously to repair them. Whereas once we supported one another through daily interactions and relationships bound to the places we lived, we have now had to struggle on our own. Displacement produced serious trauma for all of us. For our elders this has proven deadly. Each of the Big Four developments has lost an entire generation of our elders - our grandparents and great grandparents. Our children have been traumatized by this chronic displacement also. I should not have to describe any of this in detail for you to understand what it means to have your community destroyed.

Keeping this larger picture in mind I will address some of your specific questions.

*What is the current status of the Big Four developments?* - Currently it appears that some of the housing at St. Bernard will be opened up for habitation by the end of this year (2009). However, the developers are building a mere 466 units. Only one-third of these (155?) is being set aside as public housing. The rest will be effectively privatized, one-third as "workforce," and one-third as "market-rate." So-called "workforce" housing is not truly affordable for many New Orleanians. The term "workforce" itself is a misnomer because it implies these homes will be set aside for working-class residents when in fact the income-requirements appear to be in excess of what many New Orleanians actually earn. Market-rate housing isn't even an option for residents of public housing. Post-Katrina property prices and rents have increased dramatically. Wages in most sectors have only modestly gained. Buying market-rate housing, or renting an apartment at these levels is entirely unreasonable. Columbia is marketing two-thirds of the new St. Bernard to outsiders who did not live there before Katrina. The number of public housing units they are building into the redeveloped St. Bernard is short by a factor of ten in my opinion. In all, Columbia's blueprints for St. Bernard are woefully inadequate

to address the housing needs of the neighborhood and do not reflect the economic realities facing most New Orleanians. They do not fit into a larger strategy of producing low-income housing for the city as a whole. I believe that any and all housing development using federal, state, or city dollars should primarily be geared toward building the numbers of affordable units we need in order to reduce rents and put roofs over our heads.

*How many former public housing residents will reoccupy the units?* - As I noted above, only 144 units of the redeveloped St. Bernard's first phase will be set aside as public housing. It is not clear that Columbia has the finances to move beyond this first phase in the time frame they have stated. Furthermore, Columbia claims to have conducted a major outreach effort to former residents, but even accepting these claims, the fact of the matter is that their plans virtually guarantee the exclusion of the vast majority of former residents. In their own literature Columbia claims that 400 former residents (out of the 900 they say they have contacted) have "expressed interest in returning." The problem here is that Columbia Corp. acts as though residents actually have a choice, or feel that they have a choice. The fact of the matter is that most former residents have been struggling through chronic displacement, fighting irresponsible bureaucracies like FEMA, HUD, and HANO, and trying to piece their lives back together, everything from work, and health, to family, school and beyond. Many residents understood the demolition of the St. Bernard to mean that their homes were permanently gone. Based on experiences in other public housing neighborhoods that were redeveloped prior to Katrina (St. Thomas, Desire, Florida, Fisher) they have every reason to think so. To say that 400 expressed interest in returning, and to imply that 500 have "chosen" not to return, is an example of how out of touch Columbia and the Housing Authority are with the problems that former residents have faced since Katrina. This is an example of irresponsible stewardship of our public housing resources.

*What opportunities, including job opportunities under Section 3, are being provided to these residents?* - From conversations I am privy to around the Iberville and around the former St. Bernard community (those of us who have managed to make it back to New Orleans), I would say that Columbia has so far failed to ensure that redevelopment of the St. Bernard benefits those of us who formerly lived there. I have attempted to communicate my concerns with the chair of HANO and Section 3 compliance officers at HUD and HANO, but have not received a response from them (copies of my June 14 letter regarding Sec. 3 are available upon request). Through my organizing of public housing residents I hear daily complains against HANO, Columbia, and subcontractors with respect to not hiring former residents and low-income employees. I understand that Columbia has provided some figures claiming that 27% of new hires at St. Bernard are public housing residents, and that 65% are Sec. 3 qualified. I also understand that they claim 21% of subcontracting has gone to "minority owned businesses." There are several problems here that Columbia and HANO need to come clean on. The first is the opacity of Columbia's claims. They say they have reported raw data through payrolls to HANO, but HANO has not, to my knowledge, provided this data to public housing residents or the general public. Instead we hear vague statistics not backed up with concrete evidence. If HANO will not do it, I urge this committee to acquire all data (payroll and otherwise) relevant to Section 3 provided by Columbia and other developers to HANO. Another problem with Columbia's claims are that they say that by simply hiring a "minority owned business" they are fulfilling the letter and spirit of Section 3 guidelines. Need I remind Columbia Corp. that New Orleans is a black majority city? Simply hiring African American-owned businesses (or Latino, etc.) does not fulfill the spirit and intention of Section 3. Section 3 was implemented so that the communities feeling the impact of redevelopment, or communities in which significant work is being done, are given a stake in that work and allowed to share in the wealth generated by that work. Hiring a black-owned firm from Atlanta, Houston, or even the New Orleans metro region, to demolish and redevelop public housing, is not much different from hiring a white-owned firm to do the same work. The profits and wages leak out of the community being affected.

*Where have residents of the Big Four relocated? What fair housing challenges face displaced*

*residents?* - Many of our people remain in Houston, San Antonio, Atlanta, Memphis, and other big cities that sheltered us in the aftermath of Katrina. Those who have made it back home mostly live in rental housing scattered about the city. Most utilized DHAP vouchers and have been transferred to Section 8 vouchers. (Some have not able to transfer due to HANO's mismanagement of Section 8 vouchers.) Demolition of our former homes was part of a larger strategy to voucherize public housing in New Orleans. This is part of an even bigger national strategy. It should be noted that these vouchers haven't "de-concentrated" poverty, as proponents of demolition and vouchers often tout. We are still concentrated in specific black-majority, low-income neighborhoods, often in environmentally risky areas near industrial infrastructure, canals, or below sea level. Additionally, now our housing expenses are greater, and our community support networks have been disrupted. The biggest fair housing challenge we face is that we have had no ability to self-determine our future. HUD and HANO and the city's politicians imposed upon us by demolishing our homes and planning new developments that numerically exclude us as part of a purposeful strategy of "de-concentration." The biggest fair housing challenge we face is this viciously paternalistic ideology of "mixed-income" redevelopment and "poverty de-concentration," both of which amount to attacks on our communities in the name of some imaginary form of progress that has no empirical basis.

*What re-occupancy, or occupancy, criteria, if any, will be imposed upon returning residents or new residents?* - It is my understanding from speaking with Columbia representatives that returning and new public housing residents will have to undergo a credit check as well as a criminal background check. Several weeks ago when the United Nations Advisory Group on Forced Evictions was visiting, a Columbia residential representative came out of the St. Bernard worksite and spoke with those of us who had gathered there. He emphasized that Columbia and HANO don't want many former St. Bernard residents back because, according to him, they were "criminals." Our community certainly did have problems stemming from poverty, lack of education, drug abuse and drug dealing, and other ills related to socio-economic inequality and racism, but this callous way in which public housing residents are criminalized as a class has been used by HANO, the developers, and city politicians to take our homes away from us. I feel that these and most other re-occupancy criteria are not legitimate and are instead being used to whittle away at the numbers of former residents who will both qualify for and be able to endure the process. I believe that all residents of public housing, regardless of their credit or whether they have a criminal record (with perhaps a few exceptions), have a right to come back.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize a very important point; unless there is 1-for-1 replacement of public housing demolished since Katrina, the housing crisis in New Orleans will not abate. Replacing the units destroyed by the previous HUD administration, and perhaps even re-expanding the stock of project based public housing would serve several goals. First, it would provide homes for thousand of New Orleanians who would like to come home but have not been able to. Second, it would provide these folks with housing they can afford. Third, if enough units were built, at least ~5000, we could possibly see a reduction in rents across the city, in all types of housing, from market-rate to so called "workforce." Tax credits to build affordable housing have failed to spur private investors and replace what we have lost. Rebuilding public housing is the only way to create just and dignified housing in New Orleans, but it must be rebuilt and supported with the full resources of federal and local governments. For too long our leaders have divested resources from public housing other public sectors. It's time that they reinvested in our communities. More than anywhere in the US, a direct state intervention on behalf of working class families is needed in New Orleans. The federal government owes this to us. What we saw after Katrina was just the opposite: a state intervention on behalf of land-owners, corporations, and affluent homeowners. It's time for a change.