

UNITY

A Collaborative of 60 Agencies Working to End Homelessness

Bringing New Orleans Home

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Testimony of
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TESTIMONY

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of UNITY, an award-winning collaborative of 60 non-profit and governmental agencies providing housing and services to people experiencing homelessness in greater New Orleans.

We can and we will rebuild New Orleans.

While the effects of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath will be felt by all residents of the Gulf Coast for years to come, the people most adversely affected and at risk of permanent displacement from their home communities are the Gulf Coast's poorest and most vulnerable citizens. Before the storm, the Gulf Coast Region, including the City of New Orleans, had disproportionately high rates of poverty and severe disability. Before Katrina, New Orleans counted more than 6,300 people who were homeless, many of whom have serious and long-term disabilities. Thousands of Gulf Coast residents were constantly at risk of homelessness and were living on incomes as low as \$579 per month.

Not surprisingly, these individuals and families had little capacity and limited resources to cope with disaster. Their struggle for survival was witnessed by a horrified nation and followed by a massive and uncoordinated evacuation that scattered vulnerable individuals and families across the nation. Many evacuees from the Superdome and the Convention Center, including many who were homeless before Katrina, did not even know their destination point until after they had actually arrived.

Gulf Coast state and local officials have made public commitments to facilitate the return of their citizens to their home communities. To have any true meaning or validity, however, the process should apply equally to all citizens of the area regardless of income and disability, and specifically be extended to those who suffered the most from the storm's effects. To do otherwise would shame the nation, the Gulf Coast region and its community institutions. As President Bush said in his speech in Jackson Square on September 15, 2005, "We want evacuees to come home for the best of reasons – because they have a real chance at a better life in a place they love."

It is now up to all of us to ensure that the most vulnerable people affected by the hurricanes can come home – and this means creating new high quality affordable rental housing that meets their needs. New Orleans's rental housing supply was disproportionately affected by the storms. For example, according to a recent Brookings Institute report, 56 percent of metropolitan New Orleans' rental stock – a total of 108,000 units – were in the flooded areas as compared to 39 percent of the area's owner-occupied homes. It is clear that new rental housing must be an integral part of rebuilding strategies.

With help from this committee and the Congress, New Orleans can create a national model that ensures that people who were the most adversely affected by these devastating storms – specifically people with disabilities, elders, and others with special needs – will have a place to call home in their beloved city. This model will also include housing for artists, musicians, hotel and restaurant workers, and others who contribute to the city's economy and who need affordable rental housing.

Working in partnership with the city, the state, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, other local and national non-profits and foundations, and Fannie Mae, we have developed a plan to create 10,000 units of affordable rental housing – 5,000 units of Permanent Supportive Housing for people with special needs and 5,000 units of affordable housing for low-income workers. This plan already has the support of members of the Bring New Orleans Home Commission and has been endorsed by the Housing Committee of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. These units would be scattered throughout the City of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish in buildings of various sizes.

I understand that members of this Committee already strongly support the creation of Permanent Supportive Housing as a proven strategy to prevent and end homelessness among people with disabilities and others with special needs. As you know, Supportive Housing is permanent affordable rental housing linked to community based services such as health, mental health, and employment services -- services that are essential to assisting people with disabilities to maintain their housing.

In city after city, Supportive Housing has proven itself to be overwhelmingly successful: a cost effective, community-friendly alternative to emergency shelter that enables individuals to remain stably housed and achieve increasingly greater levels of self sufficiency. Supportive Housing has been successfully combined within mixed-income, mixed-use developments, with the Supportive Housing residents making up as much as 50 percent of a building's tenancy, and the remaining apartments set aside for low wage workers. In larger properties, on-site services coordinators help Supportive Housing

tenants obtain the assistance and support needed to address health and/or employment issues and navigate the process of securing disability benefits and finding employment. Other models, ranging from shared homes to scattered site apartments, also have been successfully employed, utilizing a variety of mobile service models.

In national studies, Supportive Housing has proven to be far less costly than shelters, hospital stays and other emergency responses to homelessness. In one New York City study, placement in Supportive Housing for formerly homeless mentally ill tenants was associated with a reduction of \$16,282 in services expenditures per housing unit. Especially when targeted to very frail individuals who are frequent users of hospital and mental health services, Supportive Housing produces substantial reductions in public expenditures on emergency and institutional care.

To make our Supportive Housing plan a reality, we will need help from Congress. Because disabled people who need Supportive Housing have extremely low incomes, often nothing more than Supplemental Security Income, we will need access to on-going rental subsidies to ensure that the housing is affordable. During the coming months, we hope to work with you and other Members of Congress so that we can obtain the rent subsidies that are essential for our Supportive Housing plan to become a reality.

Second, and equally important, while the planning process for supportive housing moves forward, we need your help to ensure that our capacity to provide housing and services to the most vulnerable populations of greater New Orleans is sustained over the short term, and expanded over the long-term, so that our plan can be implemented successfully. However, we are concerned that as we work toward recovery, our HUD Continuum of Care funding – which is essential to continue to assist homeless people in New Orleans today and is also essential to our Supportive Housing strategy – may be at risk. We need HUD to be a faithful partner to us as we struggle to overcome this unprecedented devastation and its concomitant effects on our agencies and on the most vulnerable populations. Specifically, the criteria in this year's Continuum of Care funding competition must take into account the extraordinary challenges we face so that New Orleans does not lose any funding at a critical time. We also need HUD to exhibit flexibility in allowing us to re-program some of our funding to meet current needs, consistent with the McKinney-Vento Act and regulations.

Our concerns are based on discussions with HUD that began two weeks after Katrina, when HUD headquarters informed me that it was considering taking funds already awarded to the New Orleans Continuum of Care, presumably out of the mistaken belief that the funds are no longer needed. We have explained that in order for New Orleans to recover from this disaster, local nonprofit organizations with the capacity to provide housing and services to our most vulnerable populations must be allowed to continue their work. We are very hopeful that HUD will work in partnership with us in the future, but we request that your committee exercise oversight to ensure that the capacity of New Orleans non-profit and governmental agencies to house and serve the poor and disabled will be protected and indeed strengthened.

During this time of turmoil and uncertainty, the staff members of our agencies have performed heroically while also suffering our own losses. I would like to single out a few of them. One colleague, Charles Johnson, a street outreach worker for the

Volunteers of America who had inspired others with his own struggle over mental illness and homelessness, died during the storm's aftermath. Another staff person, Angela Patterson of the Louisiana Public Health Institute, spent five days in the Superdome with her disabled clients as her own home in Gentilly was being destroyed, and has continued serving clients ever since from a Health Care for the Homeless clinic operating out of a cruise ship in New Orleans. B.B. St. Roman, director of the Homeless Assistance Collaborative, a partnership between the New Orleans Police Department and UNITY, worked around the clock to head up the successful effort to find and bring homeless persons to the Superdome before the storm. Calvin Burns and Wyatt Hines of Covenant House rescued many people from floodwaters in the aftermath of Katrina. Countless staff members in the UNITY network evacuated before their storm with their disabled clients, then spent 24 hours a day with them for many exhausting weeks in out-of-state accommodations far from home. And now, day in and day out, my colleagues in UNITY's 60 agencies are successfully overcoming unimaginable challenges as they house and provide services to the neediest people in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Finally, we ask that you ensure the elimination of all unnecessary deadlines imposed on Katrina victims by the programs that are designed specifically to house them – both FEMA assistance as well as the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program administered by HUD. As a starting proposition, New Orleanians should not be tossed out of hotels until and unless they have been able to find a decent place to live within a reasonable commuting distance of their jobs and damaged homes. Moreover, the special needs portion of the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program is still not up and running four and a half months after the hurricane, yet the persons who are eligible for this program – those who were homeless prior to Katrina and therefore are likely to be especially vulnerable – are being required to sign up for the program by March 11. In light of the fact that there is no plan in place and there are no funds available to conduct outreach or publicity to inform special needs populations of the existence of this program, this is not a reasonable deadline. We believe that people should be granted at least until December 31 of this year to sign up for the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program and that HUD and/or FEMA should engage in a national publicity campaign to help ensure that eligible persons become aware of the existence of this program and how to access it.

I thank you for inviting me to testify, and I thank you for taking steps to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable persons are addressed as we all work together to rebuild greater New Orleans.