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Housing New Orleans: Still a Work in Progress

Far too many people are still without decent affordable homes, and hidden vulnerable groups like the mentally ill have been hit hardest of all.

CHANDRA R. THOMAS | *February 23, 2009*

Some three and a half years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the city known as "The Big Easy," it has been anything but easy for thousands of displaced New Orleans area residents to find housing. Many have been forced onto the streets or into temporary and long-term shelters, largely due to bureaucratic delays and inadequate government-assistance programs.

A New Orleans housing report released in August 2008 by PolicyLink, an Oakland, California-based national research institute dedicated to advancing economic and social equity, indicated that the ranks of homeless residents doubled across affected South Louisiana parishes, with the New Orleans metro area homeless population alone reaching 12,000 residents. Thousands of others are living elsewhere, unable to return due to high rents, housing shortages, and delays in funding for rebuilding. Many who have made it back languish in substandard, crowded conditions.

"Families are doubled up and tripled up in houses and apartments, trying to pay rent and utilities, unable to meet basic needs," says Ayesha Buckner, homeless liaison for the Orleans Parish School Board. "All of the shelters are filled to capacity. The media portrays that [New Orleans] is back, but we're not back. Every week we get new homeless children."

Buckner says Orleans Parish is currently assisting about 1,600 homeless children in 18 schools. "A lot of people say the homeless drink, and they do," she says matter-of-factly. "They drink *milk* -- they're kids."

Among the report's many findings is that four of every five New Orleans recipients in the Road Home Program, a \$10.3 billion initiative launched by former Gov. Kathleen Blanco of Louisiana to help homeowners statewide rebuild their damaged and destroyed houses, did not get enough money to cover their repairs. The largest single housing-recovery program in U.S. history, the federally funded program allocates up to \$150,000 to hurricane victims to rebuild their damaged homes. It also provides loans and incentive grants to property owners who operate affordable rental homes, and offers building professionals and contractors training and construction resources to assist Road Home applicants.

At press time, the program reported \$7.6 billion in awards dispersed among 121,290 homeowners, with the average award at just less than \$63,000. But according to PolicyLink, the average Road Home applicant in Louisiana fell more than \$35,000 short of the money needed to restore his or her home. The shortfall hit hardest among highly flooded, historically African American communities.

According to Mike Miller, who helps find housing for the homeless as part of UNITY, a collaborative of 60 agencies working to address homelessness in New Orleans, "We have the perfect storm of homelessness in New Orleans -- a natural disaster and no real infrastructure in place to handle the amount of need. We get the results of all of the failed systems: failed mental-health, housing, drug-treatment, and criminal systems. These people have nowhere to go."

New Orleans renters face the biggest hurdles. Rents have doubled and tripled from pre-Katrina rates, and only two in five damaged affordable rental units statewide are expected to be repaired or replaced with recovery assistance, the PolicyLink report found. It hasn't helped that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has decided to demolish four out of 10 of the largest public-housing projects, displacing about 3,000 residents who had lived there pre-Katrina. Department representatives maintain that many of the city's public-housing units were vacant or deemed unfit for habitation prior to Katrina.

This month, the federal disaster rental-assistance subsidies that had been keeping nearly 28,000 displaced families in housing nationwide (14,000 in the greater New Orleans metro region alone) are slated to officially run out, even though many affordable-housing units are still not ready for occupancy.

According to Ruth Idakula, who until recently spearheaded homeless initiatives for New Orleans Councilmember Stacy Head, many large real estate development companies have been lured by tax credits, but too little of the subsidy reaches those who need it most. "The developers are required by law to build a certain amount of affordable housing units, but there hasn't been enough stipulation on how many," she says.

Many apartment developers who applied for tax credits after Katrina were required to set aside 5 percent of their units for supportive housing. However, high construction costs, the national credit crunch, and personal financial vulnerability have kept many landlords, particularly small operations, from being able to rebuild even with assistance. The result has been construction of fewer overall rental units.

Before Hurricane Katrina, life was already difficult for LaTina King, a single parent of five girls ages 9 to 5 -- all with special psychiatric needs now exacerbated by the Katrina ordeal. Since the storm destroyed the family's quaint three-bedroom rental house on the New Orleans West Bank, life has been stressful, frustrating, and overwhelming. Two of her children have been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. One daughter has oppositional-defiant disorder, which most often erupts in the form of violent panic attacks whenever it rains, no doubt a consequence of the family's nightmarish Katrina ordeal. Thanks to Medicaid, all of her children see a psychiatrist twice a month, and two take psychiatric drugs daily. King, 27, is on antidepressants and sees a psychiatrist when she can. Of all of her many burdens, however, she worries most about finding a permanent home.

"I pray every day to the Lord to help me find a house," she says. "Things would be so much better for me and my girls if we could just find a place to stay. Everybody deserves a place to call home."

In the most literal sense, King and her brood are not *homeless*. Until recently, they lived in a pristine single-level home in an unassuming neighborhood in nearby Harvey. The modest but meticulously kept home is owned by King's mother. King was grateful to have a place to live, but found it stressful to be one of two adults with five children cramped inside a small house for more than two years. "I'm a grown woman living with my mother," King says. "I need a place where I can be comfortable and my kids can run and play. I just can't find a place that I can afford." The tension of living with her mother took its toll, and King and her girls were forced to move out of the house and in with a friend.

King, who briefly relocated with her children to Dallas, Texas, after the storm, has sought assistance from every housing program in her area to no avail. From the local Housing and Urban Development office to the Westwego Housing Authority, she's told that her name will be added to a waiting list -- sometimes two or three years long -- or that the list is closed for now. "I have looked into buying houses and renting houses, but everything is double and triple the price it was before the storm," she says.

"The real problem is that a lot of people with mental illness are poor, which often limits access to care and housing," explains Dr. Elmore Rigamer, a psychiatrist who serves as medical director of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans. "When there is housing around, it's usually not affordable. And even once you find them a place to live, you have to figure out how to maintain their access to the resources they need."

Three and a half years after the hurricanes, in the most devastated areas of New Orleans, it's still common to glimpse rows of impeccably rebuilt homes nestled amid dilapidated eyesores with overgrown lawns and moldy interiors untouched since the floodwaters subsided. Despite the many housing challenges, though, there have been some glimmers of progress. Musicians Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis teamed up with Habitat for Humanity to create "Musicians' Village," a neighborhood of vibrantly colored homes for New Orleans musicians who lost their houses to Katrina. Actor Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation has also drawn national attention for its rebuilding efforts in the blighted Lower 9th Ward.

Along with placing thousands of displaced residents in shelters and low-cost housing, UNITY and the Archdiocese of New Orleans were part of a successful appeal to Congress in 2008 to allocate 3,000 Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) rent vouchers to be distributed to poor people with disabilities in New Orleans and across the state and to offer them free case-management services. PSH integrates permanent, affordable rental housing with the supportive services needed to help people with physical and mental disabilities access and maintain stable housing in the community. It is a nationally recognized model being replicated throughout the country as a cost-effective solution to preventing and ending homelessness among low-income people with disabilities -- but there isn't enough of it.

"We have a long process ahead of evaluating and assessing our clients for available program slots, but we believe what we're doing is working," says Miller of UNITY. "Overall, I think we're seeing less homelessness. Will '09 be better? I don't know."



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