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## Rebuild New Orleans, Rebuild America

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**It was hard to** imagine Hurricane Katrina survivors feeling any worse about their government than they did, but President Bush's State of the Union speech managed to elicit further disappointment.

"A year and a half after Hurricane Katrina, the president still doesn't have a word to say about when or if he will keep his promises to help rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, or help thousands of stranded families return home," Vanessa Gueringer, chairperson of New Orleans ACORN's Lower 9th ward chapter, told the press. "The president doesn't even seem to remember the promises he made."

New Orleans' residents and exiles hope that the now-empowered congressional Democrats will put recovery and rebuilding back on the national agenda. But they—and the nation—would be best served if rebuilding the Gulf Coast restarted a stalled conversation about poverty and opportunity in America.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans, it exposed America's dirty little secret—that poverty not only still exists, but is an intergenerational way of life for many of the country's residents. It would have been inconceivable that tens of thousands could be left behind to fend for themselves in the storm, except it played out on live television. For a time, public discussion again focused on the fact that the poverty of New Orleans, far from being an isolated situation, exemplifies a national problem.

The reasons such poverty still exists in a rich country aren't really hard to find. Years of underfunded public services, low wages (10 years and counting without an increase in the federal minimum wage), unaffordable housing, troubled public schools and suppression of union-organizing have contributed to the decline in earning power of working families and the rise in poverty.

But the public discussion about combating poverty ended prematurely. Almost as quickly, the president silently abandoned his dramatic commitment to rebuild New Orleans—which is still largely in ruins a year and a half later. As the new Congress moves toward capping its 100 Hours Agenda with a long-overdue increase in the minimum wage, legislators looking for a next step should focus on rebuilding our physical and social infrastructure—in both the New Orleans/Gulf Coast area and across America.

The difficulties faced by residents struggling mightily to return and restart life in New Orleans tell us a lot about the frayed state of the public services that make cities and regions work everywhere. Life cannot really return to normal for anyone in New Orleans unless all the basic building blocks of a working modern society are in place—schools, hospitals and clinics, housing and public transit. While President Bush has been particularly shameless in ignoring his promises to put New Orleans back on its feet, these same vital services have suffered neglect for many years all across the country.

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New Orleans now lacks a public hospital and has almost no low-cost health clinics—but the medical system for poor and working class Americans is also strained to the breaking point across the U.S., while 47 million people lack health insurance.

- The government is making plans to demolish, rather than reopen, lightly-damaged New Orleans public housing developments—just as public and affordable housing residents have been displaced around the country in late-model urban renewal schemes that do not include working-class families in city housing mixes.
- The lack of a functioning school system is literally tearing apart New Orleans' families as they attempt to return and rebuild their lives. The gross inequalities in our nation's education systems mean 1.2 million high school students did not graduate last year.

The new majority in Congress was elected in part on a mandate to do better by the people of New Orleans and to put the federal government back in the business of giving ordinary Americans the opportunity to build better lives for their families. There are already plenty of well-thought-out ideas that Congress could take up in its next hundred days, if not hours, to begin rebuilding an America with opportunity for all. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit, which even Ronald Reagan called “our nation's most effective anti-poverty program.”
- Deliver the education funding long promised as part of the No Child Left Behind act, and appropriate money for class-size reduction and teacher training in inner city schools.
- Create living-wage jobs by training and employing local residents to finally rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Hire workers nationwide to clean up lead paint, rebuild our urban infrastructure and repair crumbling schools.
- Put affordable housing development back on the agenda of HUD and in the national budget.
- Move towards universal health care—start with enrolling many more children in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), if we can't just solve this problem once and for all.

These items will cost money—though less than extending tax breaks for the super-rich or a few weeks of the war in Iraq. Other initiatives that would give working families a chance to build better lives—like legislation to protect homeowners from predatory lending and let workers join unions without being fired—require only attention and political will.

Meanwhile, the problems of the hundreds of thousands of Americans living in exile from their homes in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have grown more even more acute. In organizing Katrina survivors in Houston and elsewhere, we have been privileged to work with courageous community leaders; we also see families suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome, living in cars or on acquaintance's couches, cut off from their communities and many of the services that would help them get back on their feet.

While it might take Congress some time to put together a unified plan for Gulf Coast recovery, certain unmet needs are so obvious that they shouldn't take much planning. For example, ACORN's volunteer-based Home Clean-out Program has gutted and cleaned almost 2,000 New Orleans homes since December, 2005 to preserve them from mold damage and prepare them for rehabilitation. But with thousands of people are on the waiting list, perhaps the government could lend a hand with such a basic post-disaster task? How about asking HUD to at least propose a

comprehensive plan to repair or rebuild enough housing for the hundreds of thousands of Katrina exiles who want to come home?

Rebuilding could be powerful theme for members of Congress who want to take up the striking mandate delivered in the last election and rekindle the dreams of making the country a fundamentally better and fairer place. Finally getting down to the work of rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast would be a great place to start. But why not get busy rebuilding America, as well?