

Nowhere to Turn for Shelter

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In the long and sordid story of Hurricane Katrina, a new low may be approaching. In Louisiana alone, tens of thousands of displaced families who rely on the government to provide trailers or rent will lose their temporary housing next month — unless the Bush administration extends the standard 18-month time limit for their federal aid.

A year and a half is a long time for anything that is supposed to be transitional, as the families still trapped in cramped, flimsy trailers can testify. But the temporary help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency cannot end until the victims have somewhere else to go. And the federal and local governments have moved far too slowly in providing the necessary reconstruction money and building guidance. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed more than 200,000 homes in Louisiana, and only a small fraction have been replaced. (Neither the state nor the New Orleans city government knows how many have been completed.) A sky-high murder rate has dominated the news. The success of the Saints professional football team is not enough of a distraction.

The response to the drowning of New Orleans has been a failure on every level. President Bush's eloquent promise in Jackson Square to rebuild "higher and better" soothed the nation. But since then there has been no concrete action plan for reconstruction — only a patchwork of programs marked by dithering, bickering and bureaucratic finger-pointing throughout. The federal response was, after great delay, largely to cut a check and let overmatched local officials try to sort it out.

The president's Katrina czar, Donald Powell, sees his role as one of a convener, adviser and advocate rather than leader of a domestic Marshall Plan — which is what New Orleans needs. He says that local officials should take the lead. But the local reconstruction plan has yet to materialize. City officials hope that it will be out by the end of the month.

There is some local optimism that when it does arrive there will be a burst of rebuilding effort. Developers are finally beginning to break ground on apartment complexes. The city has issued more than 55,000 residential building permits since the storm, finally moving at a faster rate than before Katrina.

But the time is long past to turn from planning to action. And those in need of shelter today cannot take comfort in housing that won't be ready for another two years. The administration must extend the temporary housing provisions immediately, then make every effort to shift aid recipients to the longer-term Section 8 voucher program.

The new Democratic leaders in Congress also need to recognize that the many failures of Hurricane Katrina are more than just another reason to criticize the president. They need to quickly outline their own plans for salvaging New Orleans, so evacuees can once again call their city home.

That New Orleans remains a shattered city is a sad monument to impotence for the most powerful country in the world. Our grand plans were never laid, our brightest minds were never assembled, our nation's muscle and ingenuity were never brought to bear in any concerted way to overcome the crisis of the Gulf.

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