



**NATIONAL LOW INCOME
HOUSING COALITION**

*Dedicated solely to ending America's
affordable housing crisis*

**Testimony of Sheila Crowley, MSW, Ph.D.
President of the National Low Income Housing Coalition
presented to the
Financial Services Committee
United States House of Representatives
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Chairman Frank, Ranking Member Bachus, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the housing circumstances of low income people whose homes were damaged or destroyed in the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes.

I am Sheila Crowley, President of the National Low Income Housing Coalition; our members include non-profit housing providers, homeless service providers, fair housing organizations, state and local housing coalitions, public housing agencies, private developers and property owners, housing researchers, local and state government agencies, faith-based organizations, residents of public and assisted housing and their organizations, and concerned citizens. The National Low Income Housing Coalition does not represent any sector of the housing industry. Rather, NLIHC works only on behalf of and with low income people who need safe, decent, and affordable housing, especially those with the most serious housing problems.

It is important to note at the outset that the scope of the housing crisis that occurred after the hurricanes is vast and the problems with the response are numerous and difficult. My testimony coupled with that of my fellow witnesses will just begin to inform you of the magnitude of the task we face as a nation. That task is to “do what it takes,” in the President’s words, to rebuild the lives, homes, and communities that were shattered by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The importance of solving the housing problems of survivors of Gulf Coast hurricanes cannot be overstated. In the absence of assuring safe, decent, and affordable homes for everyone whose homes were damaged or destroyed, nothing else we do will matter very much. Commerce, education, health care, transportation, and government all depend on a stably housed populace. As important, recovery from the trauma and loss experienced by individual people depends on their ability to have a decent home that they can afford in the neighborhood and community of their choosing. The Federal Gulf Coast Recovery Coordinator Donald Powell said that after fixing the levees, his priority was “housing, housing, housing.”

The hurricanes exacerbated the pre-existing nationwide shortage of housing that is affordable to the lowest income people. There are 5.6 million more extremely low income households in need of rental housing in the United States than there are homes that rent at prices

these families can afford.¹ At least 70% of the 300,000 homes that were severely damaged or destroyed by Katrina alone were affordable to low incomes families.²

Nearly a year and a half after the storms, an unknown number of families, but certainly no fewer than 150,000, remain displaced today. While many middle class people who owned their homes are still waiting for insurance settlements, FEMA assistance, and the grants promised by state governments funded through CDBG, my testimony will only address the issues facing low income people, whose situations remain far more precarious. Suffice it to say that the many problems with getting rebuilding funds into the hands of middle class homeowners, who have been the primary focus of our housing intervention, pale in comparison to what has and has not happened for low income people.

It is important to both distinguish between the temporary housing response and housing rebuilding response and to understand how they are interrelated to attempt to fully comprehend the complexity of what faces us. I will begin with the Temporary Housing Programs.

TEMPORARY HOUSING: FEMA

Beyond mass shelters, temporary housing for displaced people has taken the form of hotel rooms, cruise ships, tents, travel trailers and mobile homes, and rent assistance provided in at least four different ways. Attached is a time line that describes the ups and downs of the temporary housing programs. With the exception of rent assistance for displaced households who were living in some form of HUD-assisted housing prior to the hurricanes, all of the temporary housing has been administered by FEMA.

Let me just say that in my 30 years as a social worker, I have seen my share of poorly conceived and poorly executed social service programs. Nothing comes close to the horrors of the FEMA rent assistance programs in response to Katrina. The best description of the program is from U.S. District Court Judge Richard Leon who ordered FEMA to “free these evacuees from the ‘Kafkaesque’ application they have had to endure.”³ Attached are exhibits from the case filed against FEMA in which four social workers and an attorney in Texas describe their experiences in dealing with FEMA on behalf of their clients. They speak for themselves.

On May 3, 2006, FEMA reported that of the total of 723,262 households who had received rent assistance under its 408 (Individual and Household) program, 246,786 had requested recertification, but only 180,636 had been approved. Another 60,000 households received rent assistance under the 403 (Public Assistance) program, some of whom were transferred to the 408 program during the summer of 2006. As of January 26, 2007, FEMA reported that the number of households still receiving FEMA rent assistance was down to 36,525. Fifty-three percent are in Texas and 28% are in Louisiana. The remaining 19% are in

1 NLIHC tabulations of 2005 American Community Survey PUMS.

2 National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2005c, September 22). Hurricane Katrina’s Impact on Low Income Housing Units Estimated 302,000 Units Lost or Damaged, 71% Low Income. Research Note #05-02.”. Washington, DC: NLIHC.

3 ACORN v. FEMA, Case 1:06-cv-01521-RJL, Document 17. (U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia. 2006, November 29).

every state except Vermont and Wyoming, with Arkansas and Tennessee with the next highest percentages of .3% each.

We can certainly assume that some portion of the nearly 800,000 households who got rent assistance from FEMA in the months immediately after the hurricanes have reestablished themselves and no longer need aid. After all, receipt of disaster rental assistance is not means-tested. However, given the cases that we know about in which FEMA terminated aid in error or failed to provide a reasonable appeal process through which such a determination could be made, we must conclude that a substantial number of displaced households are not receiving disaster assistance that they need and to which they are entitled to under law. Those who are still in the program and those who were wrongfully terminated are likely those with the lowest incomes and most complex problems who do not have the personal resources or social support systems to become reestablished.

In the most recent lawsuit against FEMA, the judge ordered FEMA to review terminations of rent assistance of approximately 5,500 households in Texas. Upon review, FEMA found that 18% of the households had been terminated in error and were reinstated. And these were households in Texas, mostly in Houston, where local officials were very proactive in their outreach and case management services to displaced households. We can make a rough, but conservative, extrapolation, to estimate that at least 124,000 of all households that received rental assistance should have received the assistance for a longer period than they did and that many continue to be eligible today.

The deadline for termination of housing aid, both rent assistance and travel trailers/mobile homes, was to be February 28, 2007 for Katrina survivors and March 31, 2007 for Rita survivors. [FEMA reports that 96,054 households were still living in manufactured housing as of January 26, 2007, all of whom are in Louisiana (66%), Mississippi (31%) and Texas (3%).] FEMA officials have recently announced that this assistance will be extended for another six months.

In the days immediately after the disasters, numerous voices from across the political spectrum called for housing assistance for displaced people to be in the form of Section 8 housing vouchers issued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and managed by local public housing agencies. The Senate passed legislation to that effect on September 15, 2005, but the measure was rejected by the House and the Administration. Nonetheless, in its own "lessons learned" report issued in February 2006, the White House called for HUD to lead housing efforts in future disasters. Representatives Richard Baker (R-LA) and Barney Frank (D-MA) co-sponsored legislation to transfer all disaster housing aid that would be needed for 30 days or more to HUD. H.R. 5393 was voted out of the Financial Services Committee on June 14 last year.

Recommendations:

FEMA should be required to undertake a comprehensive review of all households whose temporary housing assistance was terminated. For all households who were wrongfully terminated, FEMA should reinstate them if they can demonstrate continuing eligibility and financial need for housing assistance using HUD criteria, i.e. incomes at or less than 80% of the

area median and paying more than 30% of their income for their housing.

Further, all reinstated households should be transferred to the HUD Section 8 housing voucher program and continue to receive assistance as long as they remain eligible. Congress must appropriate sufficient funds for these vouchers. Once the displaced household is no longer eligible for the voucher, the voucher itself will terminate.

FEMA should be required to immediately establish data collection, analysis, and management systems such that its service delivery can be made transparent and accountable.

Finally, important reforms were made to the Stafford Act in the last Congress that will improve FEMA's housing response in future disasters. We are recommending additional reforms this year.

TEMPORARY HOUSING: HUD

The one temporary housing responsibility assigned to HUD was for the displaced people in the affected areas who had been living in HUD-assisted housing prior to the storms. These included families or individuals who had Section 8 housing vouchers or who lived in public housing, project-based Section 8, housing for the elderly, disabled, and people with AIDS, and people enrolled in HUD funded homeless assistance programs. HUD estimates that 32,000 HUD-assisted households were displaced and eligible for disaster rent assistance. First under a mission assignment from FEMA and then under direct appropriations to HUD in the December 2005 supplemental appropriations, HUD created what became known as the Disaster Voucher Program. Displaced households were given Section 8-like vouchers to rent housing wherever they were. The most recent report from HUD is that approximately 22,000 of the eligible households were participating in DVP. The status of the other 10,000 households is unknown.

Disaster vouchers are due to expire on September 30, 2007. When authorizing the HUD disaster vouchers, Congress also gave public housing authorities in the Gulf Coast permission to use previously appropriated public and assisted housing funds for the repair of damaged HUD-assisted properties. This fungibility will end with the end of the disaster vouchers. HUD staff report planning to convert former Section 8 voucher recipients back to the regular program on September 30. Those who were living in public or other project-based assisted housing will be converted to "tenant protection vouchers" by September 30, until such time as their units have been made ready for reoccupancy. At that point their housing assistance would revert from vouchers back to project-based assistance through whatever HUD program they were in prior to being displaced.

Setting aside for the moment the fact that HUD has no intention of replacing all of its damaged or destroyed assisted housing, there is another serious flaw in this plan. It presumes that every HUD-assisted displaced family will 1) want to return to the community from which it was displaced and 2) if it does not, can afford to stay in the community in which it has resettled without rent assistance. A family that has built a new life in another community, especially a community with more opportunities than the one it came from, should not have to make the choice between living in its new community or living in a home it can afford. In the absence of valid and reliable data about where displaced HUD-assisted households would choose to live if

allowed to choose, plans on their behalf are bound to fail.

Recommendations:

HUD needs to find the 10,000 HUD-assisted households who did not sign up for the Disaster Voucher Program. They are entitled to continued housing assistance.

HUD should immediately issue an RFP for a survey of a representative sample of all displaced HUD-assisted households to determine how they are faring and where they would prefer to settle if they had a choice. This survey should be conducted by an independent research entity, such a survey research lab affiliated with a university.

Based on findings from the survey, HUD should estimate the number of displaced HUD-assisted households who do not want to reoccupy their assisted units. Congress must appropriate sufficient funds to provide these households with Section 8 vouchers. Once the displaced household is no longer eligible for the voucher, the voucher itself will terminate.

REBUILDING: PUBLIC AND ASSISTED HOUSING

Residential properties that were built as a result of federal housing policy and that were subsidized by the federal taxpayers that were damaged or destroyed by the storms were the unique responsibility of the federal government to assure their repair or redevelopment. First and foremost, it was the responsibility of HUD to develop an estimate of what it would cost to repair or redevelop public and assisted housing, and request whatever amount was not covered by insurance from the Congress in one of the supplemental appropriations bills. Reliance on the Community Development Block Grant funds and the Low Income Housing Tax Credits allocated to the states to meet the housing needs of the vast numbers of families who did not live in federally subsidized housing was wrong. It also delayed reopening of the public and assisted stock unnecessarily.

If HUD has done such an assessment of the number of damaged public and assisted housing units since the preliminary numbers that were released in February and March 2006, it has not made it available for public consumption.

With regard to public housing in particular, you have heard and will hear a great deal at this hearing about public housing in New Orleans. I hope you will also attend to the public housing that sustained major damage or was destroyed in Mobile, AL and Biloxi, MS. Out of concern about the news reports, announcements, and rumors about demolition and redevelopment of public housing in New Orleans and elsewhere, a collection of low income housing advocates developed a set of principles to guide decisions about redevelopment of public housing in the Gulf Coast.

The first principle is that any public housing that was evacuated, but sustained limited enough damage that it can be reoccupied with repairs only, should be repaired and reopened with all deliberate speed. The second is that there should be a moratorium on any demolition and redevelopment of public housing in the Gulf Coast that was never evacuated or was evacuated, but has since been reoccupied, until such time as the supply of rental housing affordable to the

lowest income people has been replenished.

The third principle pertains to circumstances in which an independent evaluation determines that the public housing is beyond simple repair and must be partially or completely redeveloped. In those cases, HUD must assure one-for-one replacement of all units, the absolute right to return for all tenants in good standing, and authentic participation in the redevelopment plan by displaced residents who desire to be involved.

These principles were presented to HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson in November 2006. They are attached to this testimony.

Let me offer a word about the situation with public housing in New Orleans. It is hard to imagine how HUD could have handled the issues associated with the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) any worse than it did. I consider the responsibility for the extreme adversarial situation that HUD/HANO and some residents now find themselves in to be a direct result of HUD's heavy-handed, thoughtless announcements of demolition, and its unlawful pursuit of its goals for HANO properties.

The U.S Housing Act of 1937, as amended in 1998, is quite clear about the duty of a public housing authority to actively and publicly engage its residents and the community-at-large in any plans for the future of public housing. Moreover, public housing plans are required to be consistent with the Consolidated Plan of the locality where the public housing is located. HANO has not come close to meeting these and many other requirements.

HANO has long had the reputation as a dysfunctional and corrupt institution, plagued by mismanagement, rapid leadership turnover, and interference in its operations by local officials. HANO allowed its properties to deteriorate into seriously substandard condition. Due to the poor quality of its stock and its myriad management deficiencies, HANO has been a troubled agency since 1979, in partial receivership since 1996 (with a brief time off the troubled list in 1998), and full administrative receivership since 2002. Please note that of the 3,500 public housing agencies nationwide, only 15 have been put in receivership since 1979. HANO may be the worst of the worst. HANO is essentially run by HUD now. There is no discernable difference between HANO and HUD as decision-making authorities with regard to public housing. So the violation of the public housing statute by HANO lies with HUD itself.

There is one more statutory requirement that HUD is violating that I want to mention. If a troubled housing agency is taken into administrative receivership, HUD has two years to restore the agency to a non-troubled status. If the agency remains troubled after two years, HUD is required to turn to a judicial receiver. HUD should have done so with HANO long before Katrina.

The conflicts of interest with HUD as the HANO receiver are quite problematic. For example, HUD has to review demolition applications from public housing agencies and warrant that the necessary engagement of resident and community input has occurred. When HUD and the public housing agency are one and the same as are HUD and HANO, there is no one to protect the interests of residents and the community.

A very troubling conflict has arisen in this particular situation. HUD as HANO has applied to the State of Louisiana for both GO-ZONE Low Income Housing Tax Credits and CDBG disaster recovery funds for the redevelopment of four public housing complexes in New Orleans, competing with other applicants for these resources. As the agency responsible for oversight of the CDBG funds, HUD should not also be competing for these funds as a grantee. Moreover, there is some speculation that HUD's remarkable success in competing for both Louisiana's LIHTC and CDBG funds may be an indication of the State's dependence on the good will of the HUD Secretary. It should be noted that this conflict would have not occurred if Congress had funded HUD directly to repair or replace public and assisted housing in the Gulf, and the funds allocated by the state to HANO had been put to use on housing for other low income people in Louisiana.

Recommendations

Congress should direct HUD to immediately appoint a judicial receiver for HANO, who will carry out federal policy and will be an impartial arbiter of the resident and community interests at stake in the future of public housing in New Orleans.

Congress should direct HUD to adopt rules and regulations for all public housing in the affected areas of the Gulf Coast that reflect principles for redevelopment outlined earlier.

HUD should immediately issue an RFP for independent contractors to assess the current condition of all public and assisted housing in the affected areas and estimate what additional resources are needed to complete repairs and reconstruction. Congress should appropriate such funds.

REBUILDING: AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING

One of the tragedies of the deep divisions in New Orleans about the future of public housing there is that it has diverted advocacy attention and resources away from the much larger problem of the failure to repair and replace low cost unsubsidized rental housing. The State of Louisiana estimates 82,000 rental homes in the state sustained severe or major damage, that 47% of the housing in the affected areas was rental housing, as were 55% of the homes in New Orleans.⁴ Even if there were sufficient resources to reproduce that level of rental housing, there appears to be very little will to do so. Assisting home owners is the top priority of both Louisiana and Mississippi plans for their CDBG allocations, with attention to rental housing as an afterthought.

The major federal resource for rental housing was the allocation of Low Income Housing Tax Credits. Tax credit properties must have rents set to be affordable for people with incomes at 50% or 60% of the area median. The initial estimate of units these tax credits would produce was 54,000 units of rental housing.⁵ The reality is that the GO-ZONE LIHTCs will likely produce as

4 State of Louisiana, The Road Home. (2007). *Small Rental Property Program Small Owner & Owner Occupant Round 1 Application Handbook*. Baton Rouge: Author.

5 Fischer, Will and Barbara Sard. (2006, February 27). *Housing Needs of Many Low-Income Hurricane Evacuees Are Not Being Adequately Addressed*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

few as 25,000 units in Mississippi and Louisiana because the costs of construction have skyrocketed. And many of those will be lost if Congress fails to extend the placed-in-service date for tax credit properties.

Of the \$16.7 billion that Congress appropriated in disaster CDBG funds, \$1 billion was designated to repair or replace the affordable rental housing stock, including public and assisted housing. Moreover, Congress granted the states unusual flexibility in who can be served by their CDBG funded programs. Instead of 70% of the funds benefiting people with incomes at or below 80% of the area median (low income), only 50% were required to serve this income group and HUD was allowed to waive even the 50% threshold for compelling need.

In Mississippi, HUD did grant such a waiver. Of Mississippi's \$5.6 billion CDBG allocation, \$3.2 billion was dedicated to what has turned out to be an undersubscribed home owner grant program. One hundred and five million dollars were set aside for repair of public housing and \$125 million for a rental repair program that will provide \$25,000 grants to small landlords to repair properties with four or fewer units. In exchange for these grants, landlords must agree to keep the units affordable to primarily middle income households for a period of 7-8 years. Mississippi still has \$1.5 billion for which it has no plans at this point. Meanwhile, almost 30,000 households in Mississippi are still living in FEMA trailers.

The condition of the trailer dwellers in Mississippi is deteriorating rapidly. A study done by researchers from Columbia University of a sample of 576 randomly selected Mississippi families living in FEMA trailers found that trailer living was taking its toll. The lower one's income prior to Katrina, the more likely one was not to be working now. The children showed many symptoms of persistent emotional distress. Adults who are parents or caregivers report heightened levels of depression and anxiety. Rates of health insurance coverage have plummeted as former workers remain out of the workforce and one in six children in need of medical attention did not try to receive care. And rates of absenteeism from school are rising among elementary and high school students alike.⁶

The Louisiana Road Home plan pays more attention to rental housing needs than does the Mississippi plan. Some of the state's \$10.4 billion CDBG funds were set aside to capitalize an operating fund to provide rental subsidies to make LIHTC units more affordable to lower income households. The high cost of construction means more CDBG funds have gone to gap financing of LIHTC developments and less for the operating subsidy. Advocates argued strenuously for an allocation of Section 8 project-based vouchers to be the operating subsidy for LIHTC units and continue to assert that Section 8 is the best method for filling the gap between the operating costs of a rental unit and what a tenant can afford.

Louisiana has also dedicated \$869 million of its CDBG allocation to a "small rental property program." The purpose is to assist private landlords with repairs to one to four unit rental properties that have damage estimates of more than \$5,200. The application process was just made public in the last two weeks. Landlords will receive forgivable loans of \$20,000 to \$72,000 in exchange for renting to tenants with incomes at 80%, 65% and 50% of the area

⁶ Abramson, D., R. Garfield, & I. Redlener. (2007). *The Recovery Divide: Poverty and the Widening Gap Among Mississippi Children and Families Affected by Hurricane Katrina*. NY: Columbia University National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

median, with rents set at affordable rates. The longer affordability is maintained, the more of the loan is forgiven. The number of units that can be repaired under the program is approximately 20,000. None will be affordable to the lowest income families.

The final form of housing assistance I want to call to your attention is the FEMA pilot program that will fund permanent housing. Congress appropriated \$400 million for this program. These funds will be used primarily to produce “Katrina cottages.” These are small modular structures that will take the place of FEMA trailers, but are permanently located. Most people like the concept. However, to date, no policy has been established as to the long term ownership of these units and who will benefit from them. There are no income eligibility criteria. Is it a good use of taxpayer dollars to pay for a permanent structure on someone’s property in which the family will live temporarily while repairing their damaged home? What happens to the Katrina cottage when the family moves back into its home? Does it become the guest house?

Clearly more resources are needed if the Gulf Coast is to have enough housing for the people who live there now and the people who will come there in the future. To date, no resources have been dedicated to rental housing for people with incomes below 30% of the area median. In the New Orleans MSA, this is \$15,690 a year; in the Gulfport-Biloxi MSA, it is \$14,040.⁷ These are the people who make up the low wage work force, who are the backbone of the tourist economies of these areas. This is precisely the population who would be assisted with housing built or repaired with the Affordable Housing Fund in the GSE regulatory reform bill that the committee will take up in the coming months. The proposal is that the fund should be initially directed to states where the housing supply has been affected by the Gulf Coast hurricanes.

A final word on rebuilding of affordable housing in the Gulf Coast must be about the inequitable distribution of the funding. Although Louisiana sustained three quarters of the housing damage, the state received only 61% of the resources. Texas sustained direct damage from Hurricane Rita and received more Katrina evacuees than any other state by far. Yet, Texas has received only 3% of the housing funds.

Recommendations:

Congress should engage in careful oversight of the use of the CDBG funds allocated for Gulf Coast recovery. Are the programs that the states have developed doing what they are intended to do? How quickly and how well are the funds being spent? Who is being served?

Congress should immediately pass legislation to extend the placed-in-service date of the LIHTCs allocated for Gulf Coast recovery.

Congress should establish policies about the long-term ownership and use of Katrina cottages and similar structures funded through FEMA’s pilot housing program.

Congress should appropriate funding for Section 8 project-based vouchers to provide

⁷ Wardrip, K., D. Pelletiere, & S. Crowley. (2006). *Out of Reach 2006*. Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition.

operating subsidies for new rental housing produced in the Gulf Coast affected areas.

Congress should enact GSE regulatory reform legislation that includes an Affordable Housing Fund to support the production and preservation of rental housing affordable to extremely low income families and direct the resources to states where the housing supply has been affected by the Gulf Coast hurricanes for the first two years.

CONCLUSION

Hurricane Katrina will be remembered as a seminal event in American history. The emptying of whole communities happened overnight. The dimensions of the diaspora are unknown in modern America. The destruction is so vast that it is only possible to comprehend by going to the Gulf Coast and seeing for oneself. Katrina is about wrenching hundreds of thousands of people from homes to which most will never return. Katrina is about the sudden and complete loss of all that home means – safety, respite, privacy, comfort, and security.

Katrina is also about the generosity of ordinary people. One of the ways Katrina will be remembered is by the common decency of many people who traveled to the Gulf to volunteer to put a new roof on for a stranger or to strip moldy sheetrock out of houses still standing. Would that it could be enough for the considerable charitable instincts of the American people to suffice in the face of a disaster of this scope.

But it will not. Human beings organize governments to do what individuals cannot do for themselves, with protection and recovery from wholesale catastrophe at the top of the list. Unless policy and practice take a different turn from where they appear to be heading at this turn, Katrina will be remembered as a massive public failure - a failure of political will to “do what it takes.”

The future of public housing in New Orleans is just one skirmish in the larger battle of who wants to return, who has the right to return, who will be able to return, who will be welcome to return, and who decides. Polling data suggests that somewhat less than half of evacuees want to come home.⁸ Indeed, Katrina has given some people a chance for a better life. Yet, there are others for whom home is home, and nothing else will do. For many people, the reality is that they just do not know what to do. They are paralyzed by depression and cannot make good decisions. Or they cannot make personal decisions until official decisions are made, which have been slow in coming.

Massive dislocation and loss have already happened and cannot be undone. But how Americans decide to ameliorate the suffering that it caused is a choice we still can make. A commitment to a national housing agenda that assures a sufficient supply of affordable housing

⁸ Dangerfield, P. (2006, January). *Citizen Participation: Informing Public Policy For Rebuilding New Orleans*. Total Community Action, Inc. & Associates, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved from <http://www.tca-nola.com/publications/citizen-participation.pdf>; *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health. (2005, September). *Survey of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/katrina-poll91605.pdf>; Zogby, J., J. Bruce, R. Wittman, & K. Scott. (2006, March). *A Second Survey of Hurricane Evacuees Living in Houston*. Zogby International for the City of Houston.

for everyone in neighborhoods and communities of their choosing, including those of limited means, is a good place to start.

The recommendations offered in this testimony are small fixes to glaring problems. They do not add up to a cohesive and comprehensive strategy for the recovery of the people who were displaced and the communities that were destroyed. The lack of such a strategy has severely hampered the recovery to date. The establishment of such a strategy is long overdue and should be Congress's top priority for its Katrina response going forward.

The prospect of families, especially poor, Black families who are already burdened by the legacy of American racism, never having the chance to go home after Katrina should weigh heavily on the hearts of all Americans. The pain of their forced exile will be embedded in the narratives of their families and shape their sense of themselves as Americans for generations to come. Unless everyone who was displaced by Katrina experiences genuine choice about where he or she will settle at the end of the day, Katrina will leave an indelible stain on the American soul.

Thank you for the invitation to come before you today and for your consideration of my remarks.