

UNITY
of Greater New Orleans

***A Collaborative of 60 Agencies
Working to End Homelessness
Bringing New Orleans Home***

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**Testimony of
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**Before the Sub-Committee on Housing and Community Opportunity
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing on “The Status of the ‘Big Four’ Four Years After Hurricane Katrina”
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TESTIMONY

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of UNITY of Greater New Orleans. UNITY is a nonprofit organization and the HUD-designated lead agency for an award-winning collaborative of 60 non-profit and governmental agencies providing housing and services for the homeless. Our mission is to coordinate community partnerships to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness in New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson Parish. In addition to raising and distributing funds to support our member organizations’ work, UNITY conducts homeless outreach on the streets and in abandoned buildings, rehabs supportive housing apartment buildings in partnership with the New York-based organization Common Ground Institute, helps the public locate affordable housing, and advocates for public policy to prevent and reduce homelessness.

Current state of homelessness in New Orleans

While thousands of homes in the New Orleans area have been repaired since the levees broke, often with the help of caring volunteers across the nation, the extent of the devastation here remains overwhelming. There is still much to be done to rebuild our community.

Four years later, the effects of the levee failures are most keenly felt by New Orleans’ most vulnerable residents. For many New Orleanians with limited means, especially those who

are elderly, have physical or mental disabilities, or are struggling to raise a family on the minimum wage, the struggle for a decent place to live continues.

Although New Orleans currently stands at only 74 percent of its pre-Katrina population, homelessness has nearly doubled since Katrina – from 6,300 on any given day before the hurricane to a current estimate of 11,500 people meeting the HUD definition of homelessness: those who are living in abandoned buildings, cars or on the street; those living in homeless facilities; and those being evicted or being discharged from institutions with nowhere to go. Six thousand people are currently estimated to be living in New Orleans’ more than 65,000 abandoned buildings, while about 5,500 others are living in other homeless situations. During the course of 2008, the UNITY network of organizations provided services and/or housing to 18,875 unduplicated homeless people, including 4,667 homeless children.

Last year, UNITY and its member organizations and government partners successfully re-housed into permanent housing 457 people who were living in two large squalid homeless camps in the middle of downtown New Orleans – an accomplishment unprecedented anywhere in the nation. At that time, I could not imagine that we would ever see anything worse than those hundreds of people, most of them disabled, huddled together in tents among piles of feces, pools of urine, with rats scurrying about.

But it turned out that the people we re-housed from those camps were just the tip of the homeless iceberg. Sixty-four percent of the camp dwellers had reported to us that they had come to the camp after living in an abandoned building. As a result of Katrina, New Orleans now has the largest number of abandoned residential buildings of any American city – 65,888 buildings, or 31 percent of our residential buildings, are abandoned.

So in December 2008, our outreach team of nine people began a block-by-block systematic search of New Orleans’ 65,888 abandoned residential buildings as well as abandoned commercial buildings. Two outreach workers are able to work full-time on the abandoned building work. To date we have surveyed 1330 abandoned buildings. Of those, 564 buildings were unsecured. In those unsecured buildings, we found 270 bedrolls or mattresses and evidence of current occupation – or about 1 bedroll for every five abandoned buildings. Based on these preliminary findings, we estimate that 6,000 squatters are living in abandoned buildings in New Orleans.

The work of rescuing the people living in abandoned buildings in New Orleans is very difficult and dangerous. I believe the work we are doing to rescue people from abandoned buildings is unprecedented anywhere in America. Since the vast majority of abandoned-building dwellers are squatters, they try to hide themselves during the day. Therefore, when we find bedrolls, we go back to the abandoned building after 10 o’clock at night to actually find the individuals living there, assess their needs and disabilities, and engage them in accepting housing and services. We keep doing this work despite the obvious danger because the people we are finding are extremely ill and frequently they are elderly. In one building, we found 8 men over the age of 60 living together – the oldest one was 90 years old.

Abandoned building dwellers tend to be sicker than other homeless people, we have found. A survey of abandoned building dwellers which UNITY conducted earlier this year found that 73% of abandoned building dwellers showed signs of psychiatric disorders, and 41% report or show signs of disabling physical disorders. In abandoned buildings residents must deal with crumbling ceilings and walls; rodents and insects; the stench of feces, urine and moldy walls; and no electricity, sewage system or running water. I sometimes cannot believe that people are having to live like this in the United States of America, the richest country on earth.

Our outreach team also has been surprised to find that not all people dwelling in abandoned buildings are squatters. In the past three months alone, we have encountered nine people living in buildings we had identified as abandoned and not fit for human habitation. These nine people are extremely low income and living in hurricane-devastated homes that are either gutted or completely untouched since the storm – homes that they themselves or extended family members own. Unfortunately the various sources of hurricane recovery aid have failed to return their homes to habitable status; they had been prematurely ejected from FEMA trailers or disaster rental assistance with no ability to afford the inflated post-Katrina rents on their own. Thus, as a result of this disaster, they are now homeless in their own homes.

Impact of public housing demolition on homelessness

While some of the people we have found living on the street or in abandoned buildings were residents of public housing before the storm, most were not. Logically, however, when deeply affordable housing is demolished and there is no plan for one-for-one replacement of it, the loss of that housing worsens the existing affordable housing shortage caused by Katrina and has an impact on homelessness levels.

Challenges facing homeless families in obtaining affordable housing

After hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans area suffered the worst housing disaster in history. The largest challenge is the devastation of affordable housing stock coupled with rents that skyrocketed as a result of the extreme housing shortage in a community whose economy relies heavily on people who earn only the federal minimum wage. In addition, post-Katrina NIMBYism has presented a terrible barrier to construction of affordable housing.

One way these challenges can be addressed is through the affordable housing data base and landlord partnership program that UNITY instituted after the storm. Called UNITY HousingLink, rents are listed on this on-line database for free for apartments that rent at 80% or below the “Fair Market” rent level. Staff also works with landlords, educating them on the rights of tenants, and how landlords can participate in our housing voucher programs that place homeless persons in safe and decent housing. Like several other innovative programs UNITY instituted after the storm, funding to continue this program is ending, and new funding is needed to keep this valuable tool in preventing homelessness available to the public.

Programs and policies needed to reduce the levels of homelessness in New Orleans

We are very grateful to Congress for granting last year the request of UNITY, the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition and the Louisiana Recovery Authority for 3000

hurricane recovery Permanent Supportive Housing vouchers for people with disabilities in hurricane-devastated areas of Louisiana, and we are especially grateful to Congresswoman Waters for the important role she played in that effort, as well as to Senator Mary Landrieu, the House leadership, the Louisiana delegation, and the Mayor and City Council of New Orleans. Of the 3000 PSH vouchers, 752 are being targeted to the New Orleans homeless, which is a tremendous boost to our work and will save many lives. However, it is obvious that given the magnitude of the abandoned building homeless crisis in New Orleans, even more resources targeted to the abandoned building homeless crisis are still desperately needed:

- 1) \$5 million is needed to implement a robust citywide campaign to search for and rescue the thousands of vulnerable people living in the city's 65,000 abandoned buildings. These funds would allow the UNITY collaborative to beef up the size and strength of its abandoned building outreach and housing search and placement staff.
- 2) \$35 million is needed for 700 additional Shelter Plus Care vouchers designated for the New Orleans disabled and elderly homeless, especially those living in abandoned buildings. These vouchers would be set aside for the supportive housing buildings we are renovating in partnership with the New York-based organization Common Ground Institute, a nationally recognized leader in developing supportive housing.
- 3) To create housing stock for the poorest and most vulnerable, \$100 million is needed to fill the anticipated gaps in financing the goal of the New Orleans/Jefferson homeless Continuum of Care to build or rehab a total of 1000 Permanent Supportive Housing apartments and 1000 affordable workforce apartments in small to mid-size buildings integrating the two types of units. Of this total amount, \$35 million is needed immediately in gap financing for projects already in development. Now is the time to provide the funding to get nonprofit-led housing needed for the most vulnerable residents of New Orleans.

In addition to the funding needed for the people with disabilities living in the worst imaginable conditions of abandoned buildings and the streets, because of its loss of so much affordable housing and dramatic surges in rents, New Orleans clearly needs additional Housing Choice Vouchers for other extremely low-income residents and additional short-term or shallow rent subsidies to end and prevent homelessness.

Finally, we request that the Disaster Housing Assistance Program be extended beyond the current deadline of August 31, 2009. DHAP should not be ended until the Stimulus Act's Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing program has had a chance to get off the ground in New Orleans later this fall. We are very grateful for HUD's provision of permanent rent vouchers for many of the most vulnerable DHAP recipients. However, it must be acknowledged that many vulnerable people have fallen or are likely to fall through the cracks of the conversion process.

First, many disabled or elderly or extremely low income DHAP recipients have been found ineligible for permanent rent vouchers because 1) they missed internal deadlines or failed to provide documents or their documents were lost, probably in great part because the case

management available to them did not match the intensity of the clients' needs; 2) they need help that was not available to document their disabilities; or 3) they have criminal records, which, as detailed below, are often a result of the unusual prosecution priorities of the New Orleans criminal justice system. Many of these persons are very vulnerable and at great risk of squatting in abandoned buildings if their DHAP assistance is eliminated before the stimulus act's homelessness prevention program is up and running. Since both the DHAP and the homelessness prevention stimulus act programs are run by different divisions of HUD, and since the most vulnerable DHAP recipients rejected for permanent vouchers are likely to become clients of the special needs assistance office of HUD, it makes sense for these two programs to be better synchronized.

In addition, homeowners are obviously ineligible for permanent vouchers but many modest-income families still need rent assistance while they struggle to complete the rebuilding of their homes despite inadequate funding and frequent encounters with incompetent or dishonest contractors. The state is launching important rent assistance and rebuilding assistance programs for this population but these programs have not had time to be fully operational before DHAP ends.

The stark reality is that a few more months of DHAP are needed to ensure that those being terminated from that assistance are not left in dire straits and that they receive assistance to negotiate with their landlords to lower rents or to find less expensive apartments.

How re-occupancy criteria establishing admission for the Big Four may prevent homeless persons from occupying units in the new developments

A major problem is the denial of housing to persons with criminal records. As has been documented by the Vera Institute, the New Orleans criminal justice system has long focused on prosecuting and jailing people for minor crimes such as possession of marijuana. There has also been a long history of criminalization of homelessness, so that most street homeless people have criminal records merely for obstructing the sidewalk, trespass, and public intoxication. Most troubling is the relatively low percentage of units being redeveloped for persons with extremely low incomes.

Other information regarding housing challenges facing homeless persons and low-income families in New Orleans

The explosion in homelessness in New Orleans is due largely to (1) the decimation of 51,681 units of rental housing; (2) soaring rents that are now 40 percent higher than before the storm for those rental units left habitable or since rehabilitated; (3) the increase in mental illness, physical illness and substance abuse as a result of trauma and stress; (4) lack of sufficient medical and psychiatric treatment and facilities, especially for the poor, due to infrastructure damage; and (5) the destruction of the extended-family and neighborhood support networks on which so many vulnerable people relied before Katrina.

When a great city falls, as New Orleans did during Katrina, those at the bottom fall the farthest. The suffering and the human deterioration that was experienced by the 975 persons we intaked in the two homeless camps, Duncan Plaza and Canal/Claiborne Avenue, seemed to be

the absolute worst that homeless outreach could encounter. This has not proven to be the case. Situation upon situation of persons fearful and disabled -- the sickest of the sick hiding in abandoned buildings, seriously mentally ill persons living in side alleyways and sheds, and families with small children and infants living in cars -- have continued to confront our small outreach team of nine workers.

Just in the course of this past week, the outreach team has seen 195 new clients who are living on the streets or in abandoned buildings. As soon as outreach workers think that they have "seen it all" in terms of human suffering, there's always more. This week, which can be easily called typical, we encountered three elderly persons living on the streets with colostomy bags, two persons totally confined to wheelchairs, one lady who was also battling shingles and who is incontinent, and one person who was so mentally ill, cutting herself, and so disorganized mentally that we needed to call for an emergency psychiatric commitment for her own protection.

Thank you very much for inviting me to testify about the housing needs of the most vulnerable survivors of Hurricane Katrina.