

HOUSING THE POOREST HURRICANE VICTIMS

By

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September 8, 2005

What the people displaced by Hurricane Katrina need most now is housing. Hundreds of thousands of families are now living in temporary housing and shelters, sometimes little more than tents, throughout the south central region. These families cannot wait for new housing to be built.

Fortunately, new construction is not necessary to solve the immediate problem. Enormous numbers of vacant units in the region are available for immediate occupancy by families with the ability to pay rent — and a simple expansion of HUD's largest housing program would provide even the poorest families with the means to rent these units.

The rental vacancy rate in the United States is at a historically high level. For all metropolitan areas as a group, it is over 10 percent. The largest metropolitan areas in the south central region have some of the highest vacancy rates – 15.6 percent in Houston, 14.4 percent in San Antonio, 12.8 percent in Dallas, 12.2 percent in Memphis, 13.1 percent in Birmingham and 18.5 percent in Atlanta. Vacancy rates for smaller metropolitan areas and non-metropolitan areas are also at historically high levels. In short, many rental units in the south central region and throughout the country are available for immediate occupancy by people with the ability to pay the rent.

Fortunately, no new federal program is required to match families suddenly needing housing with an existing stock of vacant apartments. The United States government already

operates a program that would enable low-income families to pay the rent for these units. The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program currently serves about two million families throughout the country. It enables participants to occupy privately owned units renting for up to, and somewhat above, the local median rent. Enormous numbers of vacant units could be occupied immediately by families with these housing vouchers.

Congress could show its bi-partisan resolve to respond to this emergency housing crisis by acting promptly to authorize a sufficient number of additional Section 8 vouchers to serve the poorest hurricane victims. Since many victims have had to travel quite a distance to obtain temporary shelter and many will have to move further from New Orleans to obtain permanent housing within a reasonable time, these vouchers should be available to any public housing agency in the country to serve families displaced by the hurricane. To avoid delays in getting assistance to these families, the vouchers should be allocated to housing agencies on a first-come-first-served basis and any low-income family whose previous address was in the most affected areas should be deemed eligible. We should not take the time to determine the condition of the family's previous unit before granting a voucher.

Getting the poorest displaced families into permanent housing is an urgent challenge. It requires bi-partisan support for Congress to act promptly, quick action by HUD to generate simple procedures for administering these special vouchers, and housing agencies in areas of heavy demand to add temporary staff to handle the influx of applications for assistance.

Even with the best efforts of all parties, the proposed solution will not get all the low-income families displaced by Hurricane Katrina into permanent housing tomorrow. However, it will be much faster than building new housing for them. And it will show them that the federal government cares about their plight and is working to do what it can to help.