



This Labor Day, contemplate welfare reform, Katrina's victims
By Simon Greer

NEW YORK, Aug. 28 (JTA) — Jews understand the power of anniversaries: Many of our tradition's most important holy days mark a triumph or tragedy. These events, though often removed from our lives by millennia, offer an opportunity in the retelling to remember the history that shaped our lives.

This year, as we mark Labor Day, we should contemplate two recent anniversaries. Aug. 22 marked 10 years since welfare reform, which ended the federal government's guarantee of cash support to the poor. Aug. 29 marked one year since Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed a chunk of the Gulf Coast and, in the process, exposed the region's destitution.

Both events represent important dates in our nation's struggle to confront domestic poverty.

In 1996, a Republican Congress passed President Clinton's signed welfare reform. This bill replaced guaranteed cash assistance with block grants, time limits and work requirements. The goal was to move millions of welfare recipients into jobs and end a cycle of poverty allegedly created by welfare dependency.

I remember driving through rural areas of Laurens County, S.C., that year, delivering meals to the poor. During those visits I saw the truth about welfare mothers: They were not living like queens, contrary to the stereotype advanced by many pundits.

What a disappointment to listen to Michael Leavitt, the secretary of Health and Human Services, use this recent anniversary to proclaim welfare reform an "unqualified success."

While he noted that some former welfare recipients have seen their quality of life improve, he ignored the many flaws of welfare reform. Most former welfare recipients have not, in fact, moved into the working class.

At the height of the economic boom of the late 1990s, the Preamble Center for Public Policy estimated the odds at 97-to-1 that someone coming off welfare would find a living wage job. When the five-year time limit hit in the early 2000s, the number of Americans in poverty was on the rise; it has increased in recent years by 6 million.

The education and child care necessary for a successful transition to the work force often are unavailable. People who left welfare for work too often remain mired in poverty. Yet we could still ignore them — until Katrina hit.

Hurricane Katrina displayed the poverty that welfare reform missed. One year after the storm, dead bodies are still being recovered and sections of New Orleans resemble a ghost town, with hundreds of thousands of locals living elsewhere.

Crime has returned, and many streets are not safe. Too many people have returned not to rebuilt houses, but to FEMA trailers. The levees are back, but are too weak to protect against another Katrina-like storm. Public institutions such as schools and police are not fully functioning.

Yet there's reason to be optimistic.

When the government ended guaranteed cash payments, the face of poverty in the public imagination shifted from welfare mothers to low-wage workers. This change has given momentum to the living-wage movement: In the past decade, 140 cities, states, counties and universities have passed living-wage laws.

Hurricane Katrina caused many people to lose their jobs, but will be remembered for the destruction of wealth, mostly homes and businesses. As a result, many victims are seeking low-cost loans to help them rebuild. Organizations and individuals have responded by learning more about how investing in community development financial institutions, like credit unions, can help working families own homes.

Jewish Funds for Justice, of which I'm president, has funded living-wage campaigns and invested in CDFIs for many years.

There are signs that others in the Jewish community also are embracing these strategies. Synagogues and local Jewish organizations, like Washington's Jews United for Justice, have promoted raising the minimum wage or creating a living wage.

Nationally, the Union for Reform Judaism has been investing resources in community economic development, while several Jewish groups, including the United Jewish Communities federation umbrella and UJA-Federation of New York, have supported my group's efforts to capitalize a community investment loan fund to help rebuild areas devastated by Katrina.

In light of this recent activity, it's worth remembering that Labor Day was created 120 years ago, at a time when workers were fighting for an eight-hour work day.

Perhaps these anniversaries can instill our Labor Day with new meaning, for this generation and beyond.

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