



Op-Ed: Failures in New Orleans

Simon Greer

Two years later and long after the water has receded in New Orleans, the man-made disasters remain, says the president of the Jewish Funds for Justice.

Published: 08/27/2007

It is hard to believe that on Aug. 29 we mark the second anniversary of the tragic day when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and surrounding states.

On a recent trip to Louisiana, a local journalist asked me to imagine: If most of the housing stock from Manhattan to East Hampton was damaged or destroyed, would it be possible that two years later the majority of the homes would still be uninhabitable and hundreds of thousands of residents still displaced?

"You can't imagine it," he continued, "because it wouldn't happen."

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which followed one after the other, were natural disasters. But the damage they inflicted was due in no small part to a pair of man-made disasters: inadequate infrastructure and an inept response.

Sadly, two years later and long after the water has receded, the man-made disasters remain. According to a new report by the Institute for Southern Studies, commissioned by the Jewish Funds for Justice and Oxfam America, the failure to achieve a speedy recovery is startling:

* Of \$8.4 billion allocated for levee repair in Louisiana, only 20% had been spent as of July 2007, leaving whole communities inadequately protected and making it much harder to bring families home.

* \$8.75 billion was lost to waste, fraud and mismanagement of federal contracts, according to a

Congressional study.

* Of \$16.7 billion in Community Development Block Grants, only 30% had been spent as of August 2007.

* It took 21 months for the Small Business Administration to finish processing loan applications for the recovery.

And, just as startling, is the impact of these wasted or unused dollars on the ground:

* Of 82,000 rental housing units that suffered major or severe damage, only 33,000 are on track for rebuilding under state-administered restoration programs.

* After two years, 81,000 households are still living in FEMA trailers.

* Twenty-five percent of all stores, restaurants and malls in New Orleans remain closed.

* Of seven general hospitals in New Orleans, only one is operating at pre-storm levels.

The Gulf Coast region has been allowed to suffer an ongoing disaster while too much of America has moved on.

One bright spot has been the continued commitment to the region by the Jewish community. We understand our mutual interdependence with, and thus our obligation to, Americans of all backgrounds. Our community has been a model of sustained leadership providing social services to both Jewish and non-Jewish communities; our response to the ongoing disaster has reflected this proud Jewish tradition.

For the past two years, the Jewish Funds for Justice has led a recovery effort through the Katrina Recovery and Redevelopment Fund. In partnership with a broad segment of the Jewish community, including the United Jewish Communities, the federations in New York and Los Angeles, the Reform and Conservative movements and thousands of individuals, the fund has balanced two complementary strategies. It makes grants to community-based organizations in the Gulf that can insure that the voices of the most disenfranchised will be heard in the recovery process and provides hurricane victims seeking to rebuild their homes and small businesses with access to capital.

The Jewish community has embraced these strategies and to date we have catalyzed more than \$3 million to rebuild the region. The largest portion of that money has been for loans to local credit unions that in turn make loans to build community centers, start small businesses and rebuild housing. The logic in the lending model, which leverages access to capital, is incontrovertible when faced with a disaster on such a massive scale.

Three years ago, Rabbi Shai Held composed this prayer in response to another devastating natural disaster:

*Strengthen the hands of
those who would bring
relief, comfort the
mourners
Heal, please, the
wounded
Grant us wisdom and
discernment to know our
obligations
And open our hearts so
that we may extend our
hand to the devastated.*

This anniversary we must not forget the 100,000 Gulf Coast residents still trying to go home. We must not let those living in inhumane conditions continue to toil in isolation. Let us commit ourselves to doing something for residents of the region.

*Simon Greer is
president and CEO of
the Jewish Funds for
Justice.*