

**Testimony of Marc H. Morial
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Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Recovering from Hurricane Katrina: The Next Phase”
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Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman, esteemed members of this Committee – I am honored to have this opportunity to share with you my thoughts on how America should address the urgent and long-term needs of the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and how we should approach the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast area.

As you know, the National Urban League is the oldest community-based civil rights and direct service organization in the country. Through our 102 professionally-staffed affiliates, located in 35 states and in the District of Columbia, the National Urban League works to ensure, in a non-partisan way, economic and social parity and full civil rights for African-Americans and other people of color. I come to you today, not only as the president of this great organization, but also as the former mayor of the great city of New Orleans, the city I served from 1994 until 2002.

Until two weeks ago, few Americans could have imagined the disaster that has befallen the rural areas, the towns and villages and three of the major cities of the Gulf region.

And even fewer, I suspect, could have imagined the harrowing conditions that many endured in its aftermath throughout the area and especially in New Orleans.

But the news reports of the toll taken—and, it must be said, those that have shown Coast Guard officers and other military personnel, beleaguered police officers, and private citizens acting heroically in the face of great danger—have provoked multitudes in the U.S. and abroad to prove once again that a profound reservoir of human kindness binds human beings together far more tightly than we often otherwise acknowledge.

I saw that quality—an entire community expressing its solidarity with the victims of Hurricane Katrina—on wondrous display for myself while visiting Houston, Texas last week. I was there visiting the Astrodome, Reliant and Convention Centers, where thousands of evacuees are being housed, with Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, Representatives Sheila Jackson-Lee and Al Green, Mrs. Barbara Bush, Governor Rick Perry, and Houston Mayor Bill White.

I was there to support former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton who had been asked by President Bush to organize the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund to aid the evacuees. I was also there to listen to, comfort and support thousands of my former neighbors and constituents who had been through such an unspeakable ordeal and so desperately need our government’s help to rebuild their lives.

All of our Urban League affiliates have mobilized to help direct resources to stricken Gulf communities and to aid evacuees coming their way. Led by our Houston affiliate, the Urban League movement has been in the forefront of the effort to find evacuees housing, jobs and other needed services.

I have been gratified and greatly moved by the tremendous outpouring of help from community-based and private organizations across the country and, indeed, around the world. But while private help is necessary and appreciated, this tragedy requires a concerted, dedicated and wholehearted response from our federal government.

Hurricane Katrina is a national tragedy of epic and unprecedented proportions. In responding to this crisis, our government's number one priority must be to help protect and restore the lives of the hundreds of thousands of citizens whose worlds have been disrupted and destroyed. We must every day and in every way put the people first.

Toward that end, the National Urban League last week laid out a "Katrina Victims Bill of Rights," which sets forth the immediate actions that Congress should take to protect the victims and ease their burdens.

The first step is to create a victims compensation fund for the hundreds of thousands of citizens injured, killed and displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

Within days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress passed and the president signed legislation authorizing a 9/11 victims compensation fund, which eventually provided more than \$7 billion in compensation for the victims of 9/11. As it did then, Congress must take immediate and decisive action to begin compensating American citizens whose lives have been disrupted by this major national tragedy.

Second, Congress must provide for federal disaster unemployment assistance to every worker left jobless by this tragedy and provide a meaningful benefit that meets the needs of unemployed workers and their families. Half a million hardworking Americans, through no fault of their own, have been thrown out of work and, in many cases, have seen their jobs disappear altogether. We owe it to these workers to help them support their families as they struggle to get back on their feet.

Third, we must ensure that the hundreds of thousands of citizens displaced by Hurricane Katrina continue to have full voting rights in their home states. If we can see to it that Iraqi citizens living on our shores are able to vote in a war-torn land halfway across the world, we can certainly guarantee that the displaced citizens of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi continue to have full voting rights in their home states and districts. Our displaced citizens want and deserve a voice in the rebuilding of their communities. We must not compound the tragedy visited upon them by disenfranchising them at a time when the most fundamental tool of citizenship – their right to vote – is more important to them than ever.

These are but a few of the immediate actions that must be taken to address the suffering of so many American citizens affected by the hurricane and its aftermath. But as we take these critical steps, we must also - right now - lay the groundwork for the long, complex and crucial task of rebuilding the areas devastated by Katrina.

The public and private sectors of America must imagine a new Gulf region—a region with its cities and towns and economy rebuilt, a region with its people whole again.

First, the federal government must fully commit to a Gulf-wide rebuilding effort that meaningfully includes Gulf residents in every aspect of the planning and execution – strategy, jobs, contracts, procurement, etc. This effort requires a built-in job-training component and a substantial commitment to a diverse workforce up and down the ladder in order to ensure that all of the citizens of the Gulf benefit from the billions of dollars that will be needed for its reclamation.

This can be done in a number of ways. For example, a substantial portion of jobs generated by federal funds should be reserved for residents of low-income communities affected by Katrina. Local hiring requirements should be included in rebuilding contracts and businesses that already employ significant numbers of residents from low-income communities should be given preference.

Another way is to guarantee that all jobs generated by federal funds pay a living wage and provide health benefits. The recent suspension of federal prevailing wage standards is counterproductive and should be rescinded since it will cut the pay of the people who need it most - hurricane victims who desperately need to earn a living wage.

Second, the commitment to racial and economic diversity must be especially evident in the rebuilding of New Orleans, so that the city is rebuilt substantially by those who called it home and that the vibrant diversity that made it so attractive continues.

Local and minority-owned businesses from the affected regions should receive a fair share of federally funded rebuilding contracts. This should apply to all rebuilding projects that receive federal grants, tax credits, or other financial assistance. Any state or local procurement laws that prevent such targeting of jobs and contracts should not apply to activities conducted with federal rebuilding funds. This limited action is fully consistent with the principles of Section 3 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1968, which establishes similar hiring and contracting requirements for federal housing and community development funds.

Third, there must be a national commission to study what went wrong with the early-warning system and relief effort and identify how best to protect not just New Orleans but also other cities and regions from such natural catastrophes in the future.

These broad ideas are just the beginning of the discussion that must occur in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. But they outline the shape of the only fitting memorial to its

victims—to act in a way that improves the lives of all Americans in and far beyond the Gulf.

As we face this daunting task, we must work together to move forward and think outside of the boxes that restrict and divide us. This will take commitment, focus and, most important, imagination.

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the restructuring effort. I look forward to working with you in the coming months and years to revitalize the Gulf region. We are all in this together and together, we will regroup, recover and rebuild.