

Testimony of  
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Hearing: Five Years Later: Lessons Learned, Progress Made and  
Work Remaining from Hurricane Katrina  
Before the  
United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery  
August 26, 2010  
Chalmette Elementary School

Madam Chair and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for using the occasion of the fifth Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina as an opportunity to reflect on the lessons that can be learned from this tragedy. One of the thoughts that sustained me in the aftermath of Katrina was a Chinese saying that within every crisis is an opportunity and Katrina has presented each of us with many opportunities to learn and to grow as individuals and as a body politic.

I have been the CEO of Neighborhood Housing Services since 1993. I was not born in New Orleans, it is my adoptive home; I chose to live here, it was not by accident of birth. We can now say that everyone who lives in the region has made a conscious decision to live here. After our forced evacuation, and being uprooted from our homes and communities we had to make the intentional decision to return home and unfortunately there are still too many who want to come home but have been unable to do so.

NHS was founded 34 years ago with the help of our Senator's father, then Mayor Moon Landrieu. We were created to help stabilize a faltering neighborhood, Broadmoor, and throughout our history we have been committed to making New Orleans a better place to live for all of its citizens. We have done so by improving our historic housing stock, by giving families the tools to improve their financial capacity and by working in close partnership with residents, government and businesses to make improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods. We are a member of the NeighborWorks Network and have benefited by the support that we have received from NeighborWorks America both before and after Katrina. NeighborWorks was chartered by Congress and receives the majority of its financial support from Congress.

My immediate reaction after the levees broke was that all that we had accomplished in the past decade or more had been literally washed away. We had helped thousands of working class families achieve the dream of homeownership and their homes were washed away. We had made tremendous strides in turning around the Freret neighborhood from one of disinvestment to becoming a neighborhood of choice and it was under water. For a time I felt that my work, our work had been for naught. And then I began learning some critical Katrina lessons.

As it related to homeownership we began to learn that as difficult as it was for homeowners to return home and build, by and large they were better off than most renters because they had a little more control of their destiny. And the numbers speak to this: The percentage of homeowners in New Orleans has increased since Katrina, from 46% to 53% in New Orleans because more homeowners have been able to return home than renters. Therefore continuing to help working class families achieve the American Dream of Homeownership in a responsible manner; by first improving credit, increasing savings and reducing debt; is still an important role of nonprofits working in partnership with government.

There are two greater lessons to be learned from Katrina: community matters and the importance of helping residents to be organized within their communities and to be empowered to be actively engaged in civic matters. Katrina was an equal opportunity disaster; neighborhoods rich and poor, black and white, flooded when the levees broke. The ability of neighborhoods to recover has underscored the continued influence of class, race and access to capital. But I hypothesize that there was one other influence: the degree to which neighborhoods were organized prior to Katrina. The degree to which neighborhoods had pre-existing, strong neighborhood associations that were able to quickly mobilize had a distinct advantage over those neighborhoods that did not. Community organizing, strengthening community based organizations and neighborhood associations matters to the viability of our communities.

We did not just lose buildings when the levees broke, we lost communities. The fabric of life was torn apart. While all communities are important, New Orleans because it is the embodiment of a rich cultural tradition; the potential loss was all the more significant. What we have experienced in the intervening five years is that as determined as residents were to rebuild their homes; they were equally determined to rebuild their communities. We all witnessed in the early years after Katrina the sacrifice of time and energy that residents were willing to make to be a part of the planning for their communities. I will not begin to recount the number of overlapping planning efforts that were undertaken in the early years after Katrina. And even while people were undertaking the rebuilding of their homes, they devoted countless hours to attending meetings and hearings to plan for the future of their communities. We live in a country where people want to be involved; they want to be a part of the solution, not bystanders to their destinies.

Our challenge as leaders is how to empower people to be active participants in our democracy. To have the tools to do more than vote, and to do more than protest, but to be able to be a full partner with government to make their community a better place to live. We are blessed to have a President who understands this. He began his career as a community organizer, empowering the otherwise disenfranchised to not only have a voice, but to have the tools to create positive change in their community.

My remaining comments will focus on these two areas and the implications for public policy. I will use our work in the Freret neighborhood to underscore these lessons.

The work that NHS has done in the Freret neighborhood provides one of many examples of the way that a nonprofit, residents, businesses and local government have been able to forge an active partnership to create a better community.

NHS' first response in the Freret community (to be later replicated in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward) was to provide the opportunity for residents to come together, to re-connect and to allow us to listen to them to determine what they wanted for their community. Our first step was to listen so that our work could be guided by our community. We began with a facilitated conversation in early 2006 to learn what Freret residents wanted for their community. More than 80 residents turned out that evening; more than double of the attendance at a typical neighborhood association meeting prior to Katrina, made all the more significant because fewer than 50% of the residents had returned home. When asked their hope for the Freret neighborhood; the overwhelming response was that residents wanted to restore the fabric of the community. They valued that the Freret neighborhood was a racially and economically diverse neighborhood.

Because so many of the places and institutions where people had gathered were lost, our next step, with significant support from NeighborWorks, was to open a neighborhood Center on Freret Street that has become a gathering place for residents from children to senior citizens. The Freret Neighborhood Center sought to get a clear mandate from the residents for the focus of our efforts. We conducted a door to door survey. When asked "What is your primary concern for the neighborhood?" Freret residents' most common response was "vacant and run down buildings." Thus was born the vacant property campaign. In June 2008 NHS with the help of students and residents surveyed every property – over 1,300 - to locate those vacant and neglected properties. We surveyed whether the building was vacant or occupied, its condition and whether or not it was under construction. We then plotted all these properties on a GIS map that provided our baseline data and the tool for our future work. Residents then developed the means to reach out to the owners of distressed properties. They wrote 264 letters to the property owners (using their knowledge of their neighbors, rather than city records) to find absentee owners. The letters included a photograph of the property and an inquiry, not a threat, as to the owners' intent and how they, as neighbors could help. Neighbors connected neighbors to resources and became in effect caseworkers. In many cases absentee owners were referred to NHS for housing counseling or construction management services. The neighbors took advantage of the Freret public market to create a kiosk to market properties where the owners indicated a desire to sell. They helped to monitor construction on behalf of owners who were repairing their properties, but were still living out of town.

In those cases where outreach efforts failed; residents, with technical support from NHS, worked in concert with local government to use the city's code enforcement mechanisms. We enhanced government's work by guiding it to focus on those properties where we knew the "stick" rather than the "carrot" was the necessary option. Most recently we have begun working together to identify candidates for lien foreclosure and residents are even paying the modest legal fees to initiate this process.

Throughout the campaign, NHS has developed tools to support our neighbors work and to empower them. NHS has been

- Developing and implementing surveys of residents and of property conditions
- Mapping these neighborhood conditions and creating the maps that became a primary tool for residents' work
- Teaching neighbors how to conduct property research
- Creating templates for gathering information and testifying before code enforcement hearings
- Providing education on legal terminology and city processes
- Creating a flow chart of the city's code enforcement process
- Identifying resources and compiling a manual of resources available for rebuilding
- We have written a manual: The Residents' Guide to Property: Resources for Neighborhood Improvement

The Freret Neighborhood Center has a computer lab. It has taught basic computer skills to residents who were computer illiterate. They have now graduated to being able to use this technology for the vacant property campaign. We have developed a property condition data base that residents can use to input data. Most exciting, in partnership with the University of New Orleans, we have created a web based map of the entire city, that is sufficiently user friendly that residents with a little training, can upload property information and analyze the data.

We have also begun providing formal training for residents to become "Property Management Case Managers" and have trained about 8 neighbors in this role.

Finally we have helped neighbors celebrate success. Earlier this month we had a "Data Release Party at the Freret Neighborhood Center" to celebrate its successes. Between January 2008 and today, the Freret Property Campaign has helped to:

- Decrease residential vacancies by 40%;
- Increase residential occupancy rates from 72% to 84% ;
- Decrease the proportion of residential properties in "poor or fair" condition by 18%; and
- Increase the proportion of housing in "good" condition to 83%.

In fact earlier this year the Greater New Orleans Data Center found that the Freret neighborhood has recovered 83% of its Pre-Katrina households based on the United States Postal Service data, which corroborates our survey data exactly.

The work that we are doing in Freret is also being done in about 10 other neighborhoods. I am pleased to say that Mayor Landrieu and his key staff have reached out to us to learn about the property campaign and determine how this work can be better coordinated and replicated throughout the city. And we are working with other neighborhoods, particularly with the advent of the web based map to help other neighborhoods.

It also must be noted that much of the work of the Vacant Property Campaign was done by a young woman who moved to New Orleans last year as an AmeriCorp Vista. Her good work underscores the importance of this program.

So the lesson learned is that communities matter. People care about their neighborhoods. It is important to note that at least a third of the active participants of our vacant property campaign were renters; the motivation was not protecting property values, it was creating or re-creating neighborhoods of choice. NHS has never organized residents to protest; we have given residents the tools to be civically engaged; to empower residents. We do not fight against, but work towards a better community for all residents. As one Freret resident so aptly said: “We have to get together and talk about the issues and work in unity to address those issues.”

The opportunity and challenge that confronts us today is this: “How do we support this type of work in the Gulf Coast and beyond? How do we translate the lessons of Katrina and bring them to communities throughout the country? How do we bring home the lesson that community organizing is essential to making our democracy more effective? How can we make resources available to support NHS and other nonprofits in our efforts to empower residents, to give them the tools to be engaged and to work together and in partnership with government?” I thank Senator Landrieu for providing this opportunity to discern the opportunities in the crisis that was created by Hurricane Katrina and challenge all of us to implement these lessons learned, not just in the Gulf, but throughout our country.

# FREERET PROPERTY CAMPAIGN



NEIGHBORHOOD  
HOUSING SERVICES  
OF NEW ORLEANS



# Finding the Neglected Properties

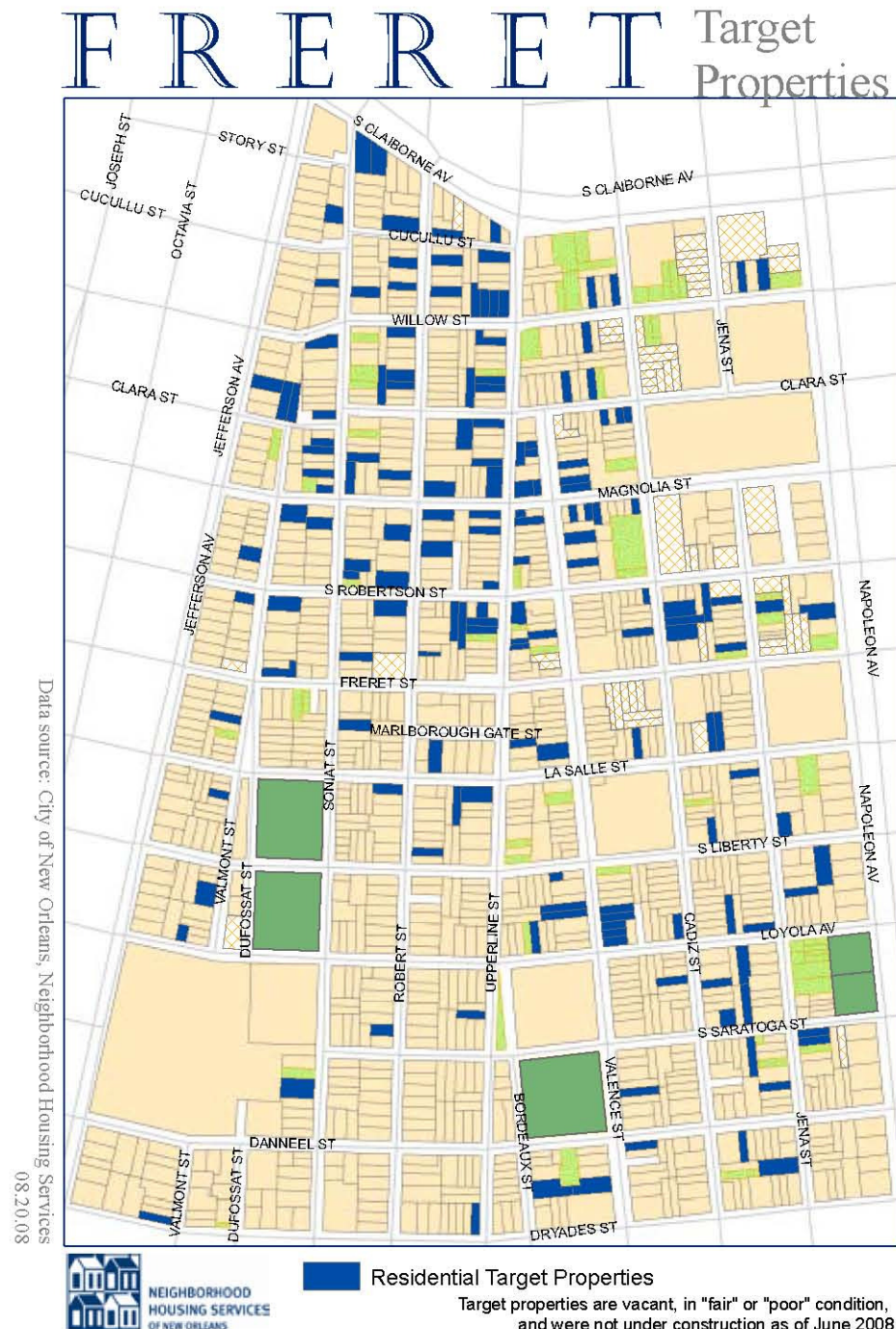
About 150 residential properties, or 13% of houses, in Freret are neglected.

How did we arrive at this number? Since residents named neglected property their number one concern, in June 2008, Neighborhood Housing Services with the help of Limitless Vistas students, surveyed every property in the neighborhood - over 1300 in total - to locate those vacant and neglected properties.

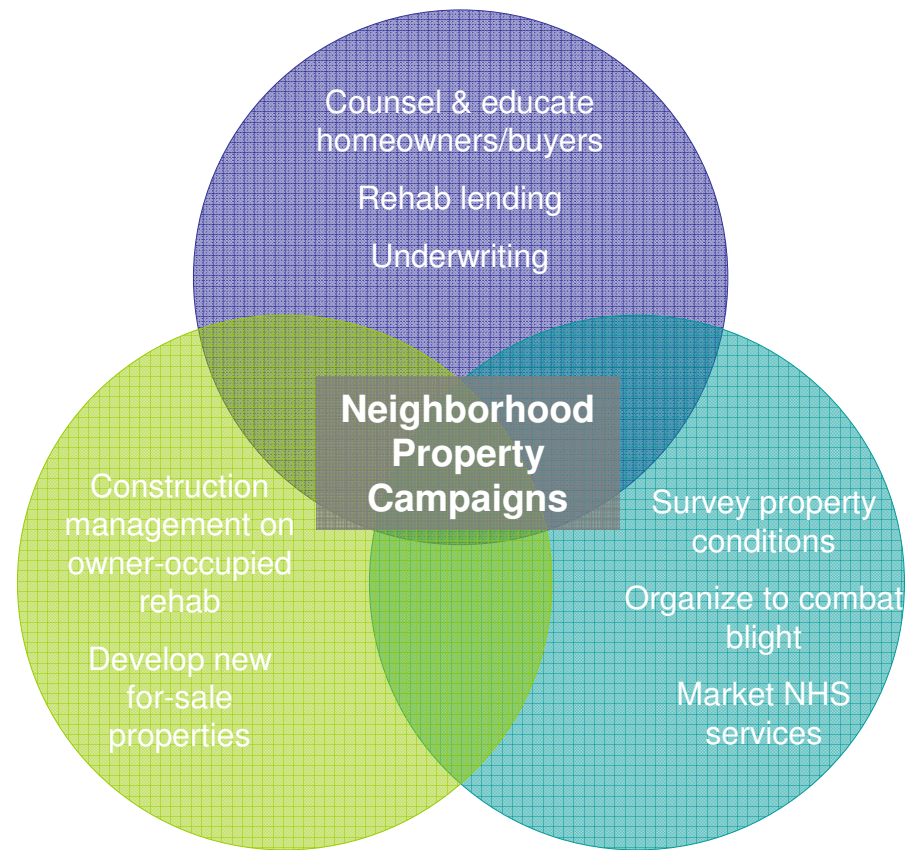
We surveyed whether the building was vacant or occupied, what condition it was in, and whether or not it was under construction. "Neglected" refers only to those buildings that meet all of the following criteria:

- 1 - Vacant
- 2 - In "poor" or "fair" condition
- 3 - Not under construction

These properties, displayed in the map, will be the focus of our property campaign.



# Homeownership Center

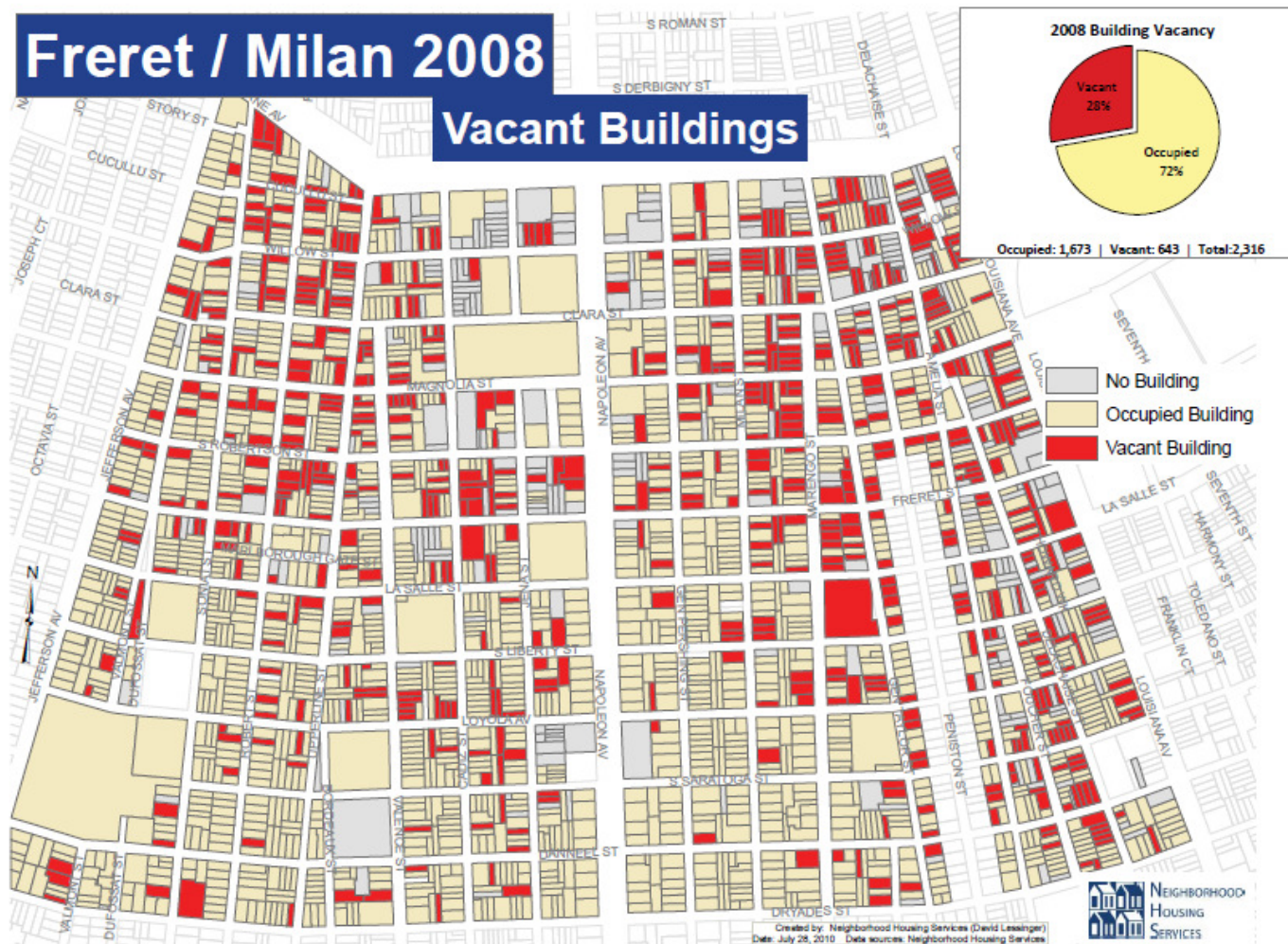


Design / Build  
Center

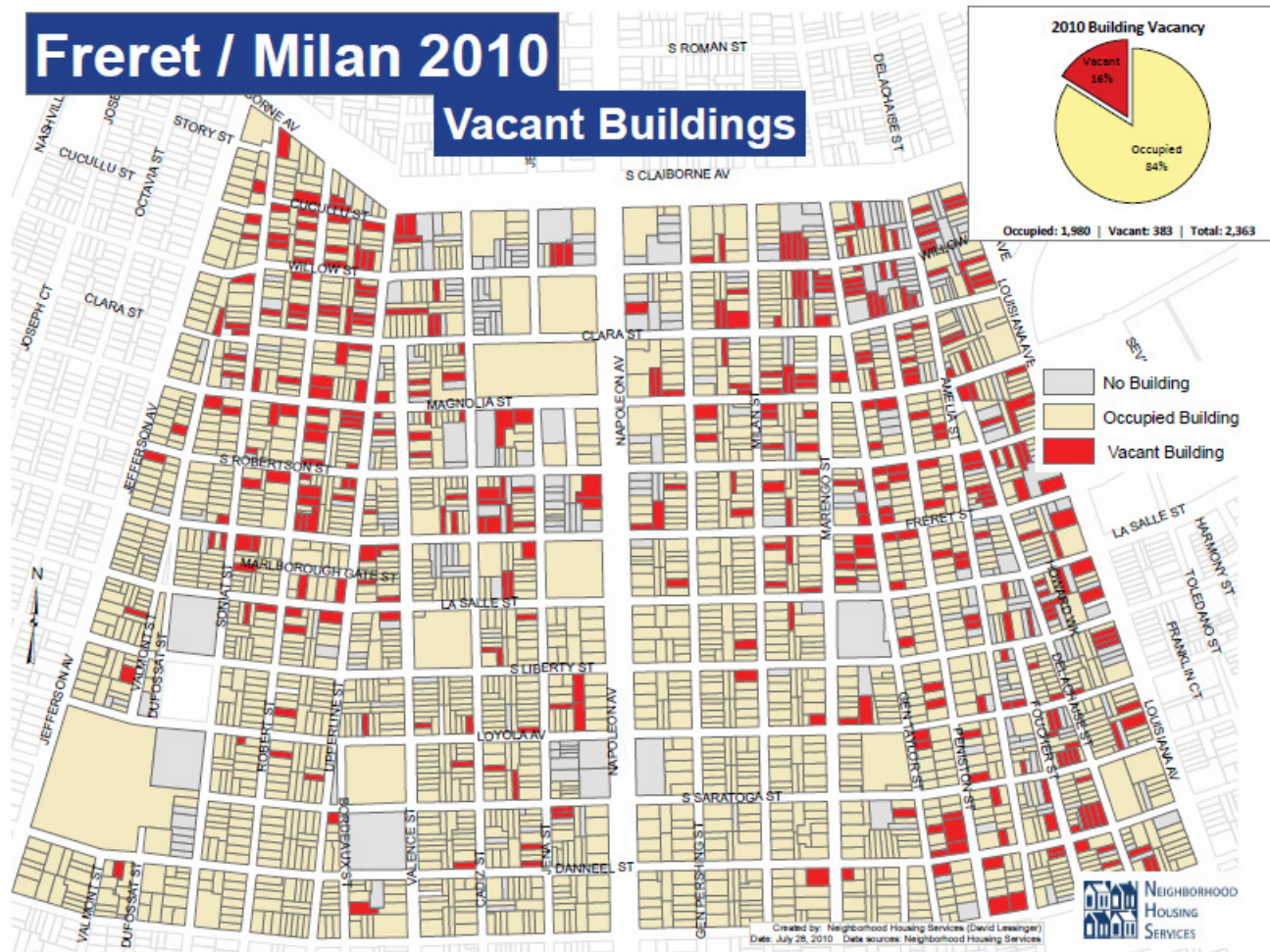
Community  
Building Initiative



# Using a Data-driven Approach

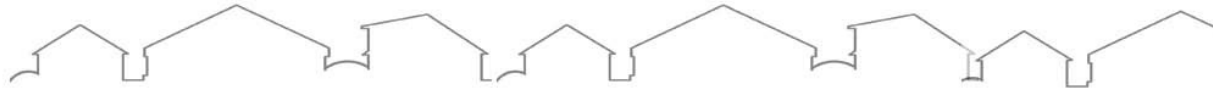


# Using a Data-driven Approach





# Building Resident Capacity



## **A Resident's Guide to Property** Resources for Neighborhood Improvement

