

Hurricane victims dealt one more blow

by Marc_H._Morial

Gulf Coast residents just can't seem to get a break.

It's bad enough that the U.S. government turned a blind eye to their suffering in the weeks following Katrina and then Rita after the two hurricanes brought havoc to the Gulf Coast, exposing America's dirty little secret - poverty - for the whole world to see.

It's even worse that they've had to fight tooth and nail to get the government assistance needed to rebuild their homes, especially in Louisiana, where the Road Home program turned into the Road to Nowhere program at least in the year following the disasters.

"That wasn't a Hope-Crosby movie with New Orleans' own sarong-clad Dorothy Lamour along for window dressing," wrote the Associated Press' Brian Schwaner in a recent column. "It was the incredibly slothful, federally-funded and state- managed Road Home program that continues to befuddle homeowners trying to rebuild with its complexity and incompetence. It ran billions of dollars over budget and who knows when the final grant will go out. Perhaps before the Mayan calendar recycles in 2012."

To add to the indignities suffered by Gulf Coast hurricane victims, they've been cursed with tainted trailers from the Federal Emergency Management Administration. Call it the hat trick of cruelest fates.

Is it any wonder that mental illness is on the rise in a devastated region cursed with a sluggish recovery process and still years away from recapturing its former glory? The litany of challenges faced by Gulf Coast residents could drive the sanest people insane.

In response to health complaints from 1,000 Louisiana families, FEMA in December joined with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to test the air in 519 trailers, discovering that fumes of formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, exceeded safe exposure by 40-fold. According to FEMA, of the 143,000 hurricane victims provided trailers, only about 38,000 are still living in them. CDC and FEMA have vowed to move the rest out but just think about all the previous trailer dwellers. Imagine the health consequences likely to mount over the next decade and beyond as a result of their exposure.

The latest chapter in the Katrina and Rita saga probably shouldn't have come as a complete surprise to Gulf Coast residents whose wills have been tested again and again for over the past two years. The cycle of inefficiency and incompetence continues to turn.

Back in June, Sens. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) and Mary Landrieu (D-La.), proposed legislation - the Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act - to enable Gulf Coast evacuees to reclaim their former lives - far away from the FEMA trailer parks. It currently languishes in the Senate even though a similar bill passed the U.S. House, a sign perhaps that Katrina and Rita victims are far from our leaders' minds.

In addition to short-term relief specifically targeted to the Gulf Coast, our nation must also consider long-term strategies to prevent a repeat of the Katrina and Rita tragedies.

What the aftermath of Katrina and Rita should teach us is that our nation is in dire need of a comprehensive plan to strengthen the infrastructure of our urban areas, as the National Urban League has proposed in our Opportunity Compact, to give regions such as the Gulf Coast the protection required to fend off both natural and man-made disasters.

According to recent Brookings Institution findings, the nation's top 100 cities and surrounding communities account for 75 percent of our gross domestic product and 65 percent of our population.

As the New York Times sagely opined in a recent editorial, "continue to ignore the plight of urban schools, and soon about half of New York City's one million schoolchildren won't graduate from high school. Continue to neglect infrastructure, and face the prospect of more Katrina-like disasters where large numbers of people live or more collapsed bridges that carry thousands of commuters, as happened last summer in Minneapolis. Let brownfields remain polluted, and risk health problems and hurt the potential for job-creating development. Keep encouraging fossil-fueled transportation, and cities will choke on gridlock, and so will businesses and jobs.

By neglecting our nation's infrastructure, especially in urban areas, we risk undermining our entire nation's economic competitiveness. We risk undermining our current standard of living. We risk undermining our nation's quality of life for generations to come. We cannot effectively plan for our future without learning from our past.

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