



## **Joint Center National “Never Again” Forum**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As a category three hurricane, Hurricane Katrina was a truly devastating force that delivered a crippling blow to the entire Gulf Coast. While images of poor and predominantly African American people living in subhuman conditions without relief flashed across television screens, many wondered how this unthinkable tragedy could ever occur on American soil. In the months following Katrina, a single question emerged as the focal point of national debate as people began to look toward the future: How can we ensure that a disaster of this magnitude never happens again?

To contribute to this dialogue, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, in collaboration with the National Policy Alliance, called upon various leaders from around the country to convene for a national forum on April 11, 2006, to provide their specialized insights on this topic. Entitled the National “Never Again” Forum, this standing room-only forum produced a thought-provoking discussion that not only reflected on what went wrong in the days, weeks, and months following Hurricane Katrina, but generated valuable recommendations for future actions, as well. *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson served as keynote speaker of the forum. Panelists included the following policy leaders:

- Mayor Johnny Ford, Mayor of Tuskegee, AL, Founder, World Conference of Mayors, Inc., and Co-Chair, National Policy Alliance
- Webster Guillory, Tax Assessor, Orange County, CA, and President, National Organization of Black County Officials
- Joe Fuller, Police Juror, Rapides Parish, LA, and President, National Association of Black County Officials
- George S. Smith, Supervisor, Hinds County, MS
- Roz Lasker, Director, Division of Public Health and Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health, The New York Academy of Medicine
- Sherece West, Executive Director, Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation

- Felicia Moore, City Council Member, Atlanta, GA, and President, National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials
- Reilly Morse, Attorney, Mississippi Center for Justice
- Jim Carr, Senior Vice President, Fannie Mae Foundation

Dr. Margaret Simms, vice president for governance and economic analysis at the Joint Center, and Michael Wenger, a consultant at the Joint Center, moderated the panels. Dr. Gail Christopher, vice president for health, women and families and director of the Health Policy Institute at the Joint Center, was the closing speaker at the forum.

This summary highlights important themes from the forum and aims to raise public awareness about disaster preparedness planning and post-Katrina reconstruction. It is an important step in the Joint Center's *Never Again* effort, which seeks to understand the underlying issues affecting minority communities during times of crisis and to ensure that communities of color are more fully engaged in future disaster preparedness planning.

## **SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE “NEVER AGAIN” FORUM**

*Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson aptly stated in his keynote speech at the Joint Center's April 11<sup>th</sup> “Never Again” national forum:

“Hurricane Katrina was not just an act of God but an act of man. It was a natural disaster but it was also a manmade disaster.”

Indeed, the relief effort that followed the hurricane was laden with multiple problems that should have been prevented. Not only did relief efforts lack efficiency and coordination, but they were ultimately inadequate as thousands of people suffered greater hardships than those who had the resources to help themselves. The fact that African Americans largely comprised this former group adds even greater significance to the inadequate emergency response, as Hurricane Katrina exposed deep racial fault lines in the nation's ability to protect Americans against disasters.

We now understand that the flawed disaster response to Katrina was indicative of a troubling reality: minorities are rarely included in disaster preparedness planning, and their needs are not sufficiently considered in the planning process. Consequently, this forum brought together leaders to discuss ways through which to change this reality. The following questions were addressed: What progress been made since Hurricane Katrina took place? What lessons have been learned? What are recommendations for future disaster preparedness planning?

## **HAS PROGRESS BEEN MADE?**

While the title of the Joint Center’s national forum suggests a forward-looking approach to discussing Hurricane Katrina, it was important to look at the present and evaluate what progress had been made in the months following this disastrous event. As the 2006 hurricane season loomed in the near future, many of the forum speakers and audience members questioned whether the nation had addressed the problems critical to ensuring better emergency preparedness.

Unfortunately, the optimism of the words “Never Again” was not reflected in the remarks of the panelists as they assessed post-Katrina reconstruction and efforts to improve emergency planning. Jim Carr, a senior vice president at the Fannie Mae Foundation, offered comments characteristic of the prevailing sentiment regarding the progress made thus far:

“When you fast-forward more than seven months later, you realize that the Gulf Coast looks pretty much like it did before...in fact, in some places, houses remain perched on tops of cars, scenes reminiscent of images from the Wizard of Oz, except in this case the displaced residents on the Gulf Coast cannot just click their heels and it will all go away.”

He concluded:

“This is not a children’s fairy tale playing out. There is no Oz to save the day. It is real life. It is unbelievable. It is tragic and depressing and there is no relief in sight, at least not that I see.”

This concern regarding the lack of progress in the months following the hurricane, visible throughout the forum, led to a discussion of obstacles to such progress.

## **OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS**

### *Playing the Blame Game*

Given the degree of trauma associated with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it was natural for many forum participants to focus on who was responsible for not only the extensive damage of the disaster itself, but also the lack of effective response following its occurrence. Throughout the discussion, there was a general consensus that the federal government deserves a great share of the blame. Many felt that the administration did not respond—and is still not responding—in a way that matches its means and its rhetoric.

In answering the question of whether this failure was rooted in the structure of our democracy and the traditional disconnect between levels of government, keynote speaker Eugene Robinson reinforced the idea that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was not out of our government’s control. Referring to the devastating Mississippi flood in the 1920s and President Herbert Hoover’s timely response, Robinson said:

“There is nothing in our roots that says we have to fumble around and get it wrong and allow a city to be wiped off the map. We didn’t in the past. There’s maybe something rooted in this administration, but not in this system.”

Joe Fuller, President of the National Association of Black County Officials, expressed a particular concern with a federal government that has increasingly made foreign affairs a higher priority. He identified this as a key obstacle in mounting an effective response following Hurricane Katrina. Fuller observed:

“All our money, all our troops—they’re going overseas. It’s in Iraq and Afghanistan.... And one of the problems we ran into in New Orleans, most of our troops are in [those countries.] So you couldn’t really make the system work like it’s supposed to work.”

However, he did acknowledge that there is a certain danger in maintaining a blame-based discussion:

“You know, you hear, Well, we’re going to blame the governor, we’re going to blame the mayor, we’re going to blame the federal government, but let me tell you something—I think it’s got to get to the point where we have to blame all of us, because if we don’t stop and bring New Orleans back, it could be another city next time. It could be somebody else, and it doesn’t have to be a hurricane disaster; it could be a terrorist act, it could be an earthquake in other areas.”

Jim Carr supported this point by arguing that the need to seek out a scapegoat is precisely what is preventing us from moving forward and making progress. Referring to the tendency of local governments to point the finger at the federal government, he declared:

“There has been enormous conversation around what the federal government isn’t doing, what the fed should be doing, what the fed ought to be doing, why the fed won’t do [something]. There needs to be more local accountability. Get things done. It’s not as if the state and local governments don’t have any funding. They just don’t have perfect funding.”

### ***Dealing with the Same Roadblocks***

With the upcoming hurricane season less than two months away, many forum panelists noted that the same problems that both contributed to and exacerbated the poor post-Katrina relief effort still exist. For example, some panelists raised the issue of the levees in New Orleans. The failure of these levees was a primary contributor to the extensive damage caused by the hurricane. When asked whether this problem had been addressed, Webster Guillory, President of the National Organization of Black County Officials, emphatically replied:

“That problem has not been fixed.”

Believing that this will hurt Americans in the near future, he argued that the levee system can and should have been dealt with a long time ago:

“Was there time to fix [the levees]? Probably. Has there been effective planning and finances put in place to fix [them]? No. And that is a public policy issue. It is a federal public policy issue.”

Another factor in the poor post-hurricane relief effort was the government’s failure to set aside sufficient resources for disaster response. Guillory expressed the view that this is still not happening:

“Resources are just going their normal way. You look at the budget of this country today—you look at the budget and how money is being set up...and you remember the guy who says, ‘well, you know, I know my bridge in Alaska doesn’t go anywhere, but the people of Alaska need it.’ It doesn’t matter that there may be a greater need somewhere else.”

He added: “The whole issue of governance and our democracy, we’re going to have to take a look at it.”

### ***Reaching the Limits of Generosity***

Some panelists did acknowledge that substantial progress has been made in other areas, such as fundraising and efforts to accommodate evacuees. Sherece West, Executive Director of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, and Felicia Moore, a member of the Atlanta City Council and President of the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials, both spoke about these issues, respectively, in a positive light. However, they also acknowledged that we are beginning to see the limits of people’s generosity, especially as more and more time passes. Labeling this as “donor fatigue,” Sherece West highlighted the uncertainty inherent in predicting the levels of future giving:

“...As I look at the news and read the newspaper, other issues are taking precedence over supporting [Hurricanes] Rita and Katrina issues. All I can say is the generosity was there as late as last week—we received a donation of \$100,000 from a major corporation ... but I don’t know if I would be able to say we got \$100,000 donation in June or later.”

Felicia Moore provided a different perspective on “donor fatigue” as she pointed to the growing resistance of various cities to house out-of-state Katrina evacuees. Noting the substantial increases in some southern states’ populations, she said:

“And of course when it first started happening, everyone [was] welcoming...but, you know, like those old houseguests, once they stay around for a while—you start to wonder and hope that they move on. And I’m beginning to hear that strain, particularly from those in some of those outlying communities.”

She emphasized this mounting tension between limited resources and generosity by providing a poignant example of what was occurring in the city of Atlanta:

“Hurricane Katrina came. New people came. We bent over backwards to help them, but it’s very difficult to sit and look in the faces of the people that have been coming down to city hall time after time looking for money for homelessness, and people who needed daycare and childcare and housing. And that is, I think, one of the most difficult things about housing evacuees is people say, ‘you treat other people better than you treat your own people. You can find a million dollars in your budget for them but you couldn’t find a million dollars for us.”

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## **WHAT LESSONS HAVE WE LEARNED?**

Pointing to both the upcoming hurricane season and the constant presence of other potential disasters such as terrorist attacks and infectious diseases, forum panelists emphasized that the nation must recognize the urgency in reforming disaster preparedness planning. In order to provide sound recommendations for improving disaster planning, however, it was necessary to first “take inventory” of the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina.

### ***Reforming Public Leadership***

Panelists agreed that the source of many problems that arose in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina ought to be attributed to public leadership. Sherece West highlighted one particular area of concern when she alluded to what happened immediately following the disaster:

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“You hear after the fact that the federal government was deferring to the state government, who was deferring to local government, who then deferred to state government, who then didn’t know what the federal government was doing.”

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She called on public officials to not only be more informed about their particular role when disasters strike, but also to be more organized in mounting an effective response. She concluded: “It’s knowing who has jurisdiction and what the local laws are and the like.”

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Webster Guillory echoed this call for better organization among public officials:

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“Organization is something that I think we have to look to our elected officials to bring to this issue.... It clearly is not coming from our Congress. It clearly is not coming from county officials. Where is that organizing voice, that organizing body that it going to step up on those things that are critical in this country to us?”

Citing another area of concern with current public leadership, George Smith—one of the longest-serving African American county officials in the United States—described the limited practice of incorporating diversity in policy formation and its implications for disaster preparedness planning:

“Policies, in my opinion, were not designed with African Americans in mind. No other act has African Americans in mind, be it disaster or any other policy.... As it’s pertaining to response to disaster, there has never been a safety measure available regarding these individuals.”

Indeed, given the fact that the majority of those left behind to brave the storm and its aftermath were African American, Hurricane Katrina revealed that these individuals are at greater risk than other populations when disasters occur. Consequently, many panelists listed diversity as a factor that must be taken into account to a greater degree in the future. Mayor Johnny Ford of Tuskegee, Alabama, declared that it should be incorporated in all aspects of emergency preparedness planning:

“Diversity ought to be exhibited at every level, in the planning, in the evacuation, in the execution, in the provision of resources, in the solutions.”

He concluded:

“In other words, ... power decision making should not be made only by the majority community; it’s got to be majority, minority; there has to be diversity at every level.”

This call for greater diversity in decision making was not just limited to race. Rather, given the great variations of geography in the United States, Webster Guillory stated that these geographical differences are critical for public officials to understand if they are to craft effective disaster relief policy:

“If politics is local, these kinds of issues cannot be solved in a city. They cannot be solved in a block meeting. These issues cannot be solved that way. They cannot be solved by one city council member or by one county official or by one state legislature. These are regional issues and we have to solve them and we have to plan differently to solve them.”

***Preparedness is Essential for All Parties***

The discussion was not limited to the inadequacies of public leadership. Many noted that while government officials were often ill-informed about their respective roles after Hurricane Katrina hit, several nonprofit organizations also suffered from this same problem, causing the relief effort on both fronts to be inefficient and even stagnant at times. When referring to these organizations and their ability to provide assistance to hurricane victims, Sherece West questioned how much more of a valuable source of help these organizations would have been had they “just planned who did what and how, who gets what resources and how do we pool our resources to meet the demands of this emergency?”

To address this problem, she recommended:

“Look at the nonprofit organizations that are in your states, cities, [and] jurisdictions, and determine their capacities and who has what role ahead of time for a disaster.”

Jim Carr reiterated this idea as he identified the reason why nonprofit organizations were unable to act efficiently after Hurricane Katrina:

“The problem is that they don’t have the capacity to actually find out and build a graphic image of all the intermediary institutions that are actually doing planning-related work in the state.”

Declaring that “there has been [too] much wasted time,” he held that the resolution of this problem would be “enormously rich and helpful because every time an institution wants to do something, they have to know who to call to find out whether they are overlapping and duplicating.”

### *Understanding the Value of Community Input*

Some forum panelists stated that the government’s inability to provide relief assistance for many African Americans after Katrina was largely due to its reliance on general assumptions about the American population in disaster preparedness planning. Dr. Roz Lasker, director of the Division of Public Health and the Center from the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health at The New York Academy of Medicine, outlined the troublesome implications of this approach:

“Currently, planners are developing instructions for people to follow without finding out whether it’s actually possible for them to follow the instructions or whether the instructions are even the most protective action for certain groups of people to take...When planners don’t understand the barriers that make it difficult for people to protect themselves in certain ways, communities can’t organize in advance to address the life-and-death issues that their residents will face.”

Highlighting this as a critical flaw in traditional planning efforts, she called for “a bottom-up process in which the real-life perspectives of people who need to be protected in disasters form the basis for community planning.”

As the chief executive officer of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation—an independent philanthropic organization that supports nonprofit organizations engaged in economic development, housing, land-use planning, education reform, and health care—Sherece West further emphasized the necessity of utilizing greater community input in the future:

“We should invest in community building. We should invest in those comprehensive community development approaches that are geared towards eradicating poverty, organizing citizens, building citizen voice, building leadership, building citizenship.... We have to invest in our people. We have to build our community to obtain the resources we need.”

According to Dr. Lasker, this should not be a difficult task, as “[The New York Academy of Medicine] found that one-third of the American people are ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ interested in personally helping government and other community organizations develop these kinds of plans.” Providing a concrete example of this, she described a project, entitled “Redefining Readiness,” that is currently in its beginning stages. The Redefining Readiness project has placed teams at four local demonstration sites—Chicago, Illinois; Savannah, Georgia; Carlsbad, New Mexico; and rural southeast Oklahoma—to institute a process that taps into “the commonsense knowledge of community residents to figure out what needs to be done to protect them in emergency situations.” Residents are first put in small discussion groups to reveal barriers that make it difficult for them to protect themselves in a diverse range of disaster situations. Then action teams are formed in which community residents, private sector organizations, and government agencies work together to develop strategies to address these barriers. Due to the interest these sites have attracted across the country, Dr. Lasker said, manuals will be distributed for communities to use in their respective locations.

Reilly Morse, a senior attorney with the Mississippi Center for Justice, offered another way that organizations can go about obtaining community-based help. Describing his work setting up various community development corporations in coastal Mississippi, he highlighted the importance of making people aware of a community’s past when soliciting community action:

“Instead of going out and setting up corporations and trying to get a bunch of funding, first get the community histories written. Write those, turn those into the communities ... and then, the corporations will form themselves. The people will already have gotten the glue together from those histories, being reminded of how it is we got to this point ... [and] the links between the various communities. That seems to be a successful strategy, and I hope that if it’s needed in the future that people continue to do that, because it seems to give hope to people to start talking

about, to start reflecting on their past at a time when things were in some ways more cohesive when they're trying to deal with these crises.”

### ***Recognizing the Importance of Environmental Justice***

In his keynote speech, Eugene Robinson proposed that Hurricane Katrina and the extensive damage it caused was partly due to the failure of government officials to recognize the inextricable link between geography and poverty. Giving a historical account of what this link entails, he explained:

“Low-income people, particularly black people, were encouraged over the years, over the centuries really, to settle in the bottom, in the lowest, most vulnerable land.”

He asserted that this “basic pattern of settlement [in New Orleans]” was instrumental in understanding why African Americans were hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina. Since “neither on the local nor on the national level did officials take into account the inevitability of a hurricane and the necessity to protect these low-lying areas from what would inevitably happen,” he argued that the concept of environmental justice was ultimately ignored.

Later in the discussion, Reilly Morse developed this idea further as he described an “immediate problem facing New Orleans in the very near future.” He pointed out that the same problem that “caused the failure of the levees in the Lower Ninth Ward remains [unresolved].”

However, Morse did acknowledge that this disaster has enabled us to think about incorporating environmental justice into our disaster preparedness planning. He sounded an optimistic note in saying:

“There is an opportunity in New Orleans now, and it is happening for an alliance between environmentalists and poverty advocates to change that discussion.”

Suggesting that these types of partnerships do work, he referred to his own personal experience as a small solo practitioner in Gulfport, Mississippi. When an alliance between African American residents, the Sierra Club, and other environmentalist groups was formed, they “were able to hold and push back what was supposed to be an unstoppable development project that would have caused significant flooding into neighborhoods of color.”

### ***Modifying the Disaster Alert System***

Some panelists contended that natural disasters cannot be framed in the same format as in the past. Referring to what happened immediately before Hurricane Katrina, Reilly Morse pointed out the shortcomings of our traditional weather advisory system:

“We have to put more time ahead of the decisions that we make. We have to realize that four days ahead or five days ahead may be the time when people have to pull the trigger ... We cannot go with over-simplistic notions like this is only a category three storm, which Katrina was turning into when it hit the Gulf Coast ... That influenced local, older people who were experienced with storms and from whom younger or newer arrivals took their model. And if there was doubt about whether to stay or go, people looked to those who had been through earlier storms.”

Arguing that scientists need to be more involved in alerting people about the implications of possible disasters, he declared:

“We need to be more aware of the conditioning that is caused by these oversimplified models and we may need to make our scientific community become a little more nuanced in explaining what is going to happen.”

Given that individuals often assume an attitude of “it will not happen to me” when potentially facing traumatic situations, it was acknowledged that dispelling this notion may be a difficult task, especially when coupled with the vast number of reforms that are needed to improve disaster preparedness planning. However, believing that our ability to effect change is influenced by our psychological state, Jim Carr suggested:

“We need to balance being too harsh about expectations being too high, and also balance our expectations being too low. There is a happy medium. And I would say going forward, the challenge is for us to find that happy medium.”

### ***Not Waiting to Act***

Forum panelists temporarily shifted their focus away from disaster planning to efforts to assist Hurricane Katrina victims after the disaster took place. It was noted that a number of those who were affected by Katrina are currently unable to return to the Gulf Coast—not necessarily because of environmental reasons, but rather due to administrative inaction. They contended that a more proactive approach should have been taken by various government entities in helping individuals reestablish themselves in the area. Consequently, various suggestions were proposed as ways to both jumpstart and facilitate this process. Reilly Morse, for example, proposed that the resolution of housing problems be a top priority in efforts to bring people back to a damage-stricken area:

“A thing that could be done and that would solve several pressing problems is if more funds were directed into the immediate short-term repair of 75 percent of the low-income housing. Go ahead and fix... the sewage, the water, the power. All of that is there.... Make [housing] be a priority.”

Arguing against “FEMA trailers [placed] like fields of mushrooms in remote locations,” Morse argued that the short-term repair of housing would not only be more useful in the long-run, but more appealing to individuals as well. Jim Carr later supported this idea as he stated, “Leave no housing opportunities under-utilized.”

However, Carr did not just limit this call to action to housing. He pointed out two other areas that are in need of immediate attention. Arguing that the only reason why economic activity is not happening in New Orleans is because people simply do not know what jobs are currently available, he called on organizations and government officials to be more proactive in making this information accessible. Noting that “[jobs] are available for which you can’t hire [anyone] because there are not people ... [living] there,” he suggested that we “do a survey and figure out who needs to be there.”

Carr also lamented that “many individuals reported to the [Fannie Mae Foundation] that they were being cut off from state benefits in the state of Louisiana because they had crossed the [state] line.” Reminding the audience members that “they didn’t cross the line for vacation,” he asserted:

“We need to fix that problem and that’s one that we should be fixing immediately.”

He concluded his thought by advocating for “systems that better connect people to their benefits on an ongoing basis.”

### *Preserving the Culture*

Some panelists did caution that, while intensifying the rebuilding effort is key, it is important to ensure that this effort is undertaken with the “right intentions.” Eugene Robinson elaborated on this as he reminded the audience that it is important to keep in mind what kind of city people are trying to recreate when rebuilding New Orleans:

“This is a major American city that was wiped off the map. Will this nation put it back together in the best interests of the people who live there? Or will it be put together as a kind of higher income naughty Disneyland—a Disneyland with strip bars and a lot of drinking?”

Jim Carr provided another perspective on this call to rebuild New Orleans the “right” way as he reflected on the implications of certain government proposals that will inevitably change the demographic composition of New Orleans. Noting that the Cajun culture is traditionally of African American origin, he observed:

“One of the interesting things is a lot of people keep saying, ‘Support the [Cajun] culture; preserve the culture. But let’s not have all those poor people come back.’”

Warning that “culture is a living thing,” Carr provided an analogy to point out the consequences of losing sight of this fact:

“If we were to try to extend a Native American cultural tradition by hopping on a bus and going out to a native land, painting our faces, and wearing headdress, it would be a ruse, a farce. We don’t know that culture. We don’t own it. We can’t preserve it.”

Returning to focus on New Orleans, he held that “New Orleans stands the risk of having that happen unless people know and understand fully that you must have people there who are the Cajun culture, who are the Bayou culture.”

### ***Turning Up the Noise Level***

While forum participants were eager to discuss ways in which disaster planning can improve in the future, several panelists acknowledged that the focus first must be on putting this issue on the agenda of policymakers. Speaking from the audience, Susan Taylor, editorial director of *Essence Magazine* and member of the Joint Center Board of Governors, provided a clear picture of why this needs to be a top priority:

“There are some good people in Congress, absolutely, and at the local level. But their voices have been quieted and that’s the truth.... There is no way for the region to recover without massive federal intervention.”

She then gave voice to what became one of the most important themes of the forum:

“The question comes back to: how do we make the noise? That’s what we have to organize around.”

Reilly Morse later affirmed:

“When we talk about moving forward, we have got to make that noise level high.”

Other panelists suggested potential ways in which this could be achieved. Opting for a unified approach on behalf of those organizations that have a stake in this matter, George Smith recommended:

“It is important that we try, through organizations that have brought us together today, and come together again with that loud voice and do as we know how to do to continue with that loud voice to close that gap that is so wide in our planning, as we plan for whatever may affect us in the future so that it will never happen again.”

Morse reinforced this idea, stating that efforts to increase the noise level can be enhanced through the assistance of these types of organizations:

“When you talk about how to move ahead, you certainly have to raise the national noise level, but I think you also have to include a very strong form of support through this Joint Center and whatever other means are possible for local officials of color to access the staff and capacity and the muscle to be able to push these kinds of issues, these kinds of zoning issues, these kinds of issues that are going to result in more inter-linked communities.”

### *A Change of Heart*

In bringing the forum to a close, Dr. Gail Christopher lauded the organizations represented at the forum for trying to find ways to prevent disasters of Hurricane Katrina’s magnitude from occurring in the future. But she also suggested that “in order for us to [truly] move forward creatively in terms of catastrophe and disaster planning,” we must first undergo a “change of heart.” Alluding to the old axiom of her grandmother, “if they knew better, they’d do better,” she asked, “what kind of heart knew better and didn’t do better?” Believing that future disaster preparedness planning must encompass greater compassion for those that it serves to protect, she further explained:

“It’s the social contract that is being decimated and violated, and it will take a change of heart to allow us to reconnect with the social contract that is so critical to our future.”

### **Taking the Next Steps**

In a December 2005 article on the Joint Center’s website, Joint Center editor Susanna Dilliplane wrote:

“Leaders across the sectors and across government levels must help this nation to see beyond what is in front of us—the barriers, the seemingly intractable problems—to see what is possible, what we might achieve, and what we might make this country look like for future generations. This disaster has offered Americans a chance not to reestablish what America was, but to establish what America can and should be.”

These optimistic words are fitting for describing the spirit of the Joint Center’s national forum. Staying true to its title, “Never Again,” panelists shifted their attention to the future, discussing what steps can and should be taken to reform current disaster planning. It was acknowledged that this task may be difficult to perform because, as Jim Carr noted:

“[Never Again] assumes forward-looking conversations that build off of lessons that we’ve learned. My problem is that it’s hard for me to look forward when every single day there is a new lesson to be learned on what not to do.”

Within this context, panelists offered the following recommendations as possible starting points for improving the current rebuilding efforts and future disaster preparedness planning.

### *Specific to the Gulf Coast*

- Direct more funds toward the immediate short-term repair of low-income housing.
- Conduct a study to determine what jobs are currently available on the Gulf Coast so that economic activity can return to damage-stricken areas.
- Reconnect those who were forced to relocate out of Louisiana with their state benefits to ensure that these individuals are receiving not only what they are entitled to, but an additional means of financial assistance as well.

### *Public Sector*

- Ensure that public officials are better informed about their particular role when disasters occur; this includes knowing who has jurisdiction and what local laws actually entail.
- Include the real-life perspectives of those who will be directly affected by a potential disaster in disaster planning.
- Solicit greater community input by encouraging nonprofit organizations to remind people of the historical links between various communities.
- Incorporate diversity into every aspect of disaster preparedness planning to guarantee that people of color will enjoy the same level of protection as non-minorities.
- Account for regional differences when crafting effective relief policy.

### *Nonprofit Sector*

- Find and implement new alternatives to our traditional weather advisory system. They should account for racial and class differences within communities.
- Determine the capacities and roles of relief organizations ahead of time. One way to facilitate this is to create a graphic image of all the intermediary institutions that are doing planning-related work in a state.

- Make the scientific community more involved in explaining all possible consequences of upcoming natural disasters. Oversimplified models that cause people to ignore warnings must be replaced.
  - Turn up the noise level. Organizations must come together with a strong voice to ensure that the improvement of disaster planning is on the agenda of policymakers.
  - Form alliances between environmentalists and poverty advocates to ensure that environmental justice is incorporated into disaster preparedness planning.
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## CONCLUSION

In moving forward, it is important to remember that these recommendations represent words on paper and cannot be translated into action unless individuals and organizations actively work to do so. Furthermore, despite the value of these recommendations, care must be taken when implementing them. For example, with regard to those that are specific to the Gulf Coast, we need to make sure that rebuilding efforts are conducted with the “right intentions.” Not only must we not lose sight of cultural traditions in place before the hurricane, but—in starting anew—we need to be mindful of the interests of the people who lived there. Moreover, with many recommendations focusing on the reform of disaster preparedness planning, we cannot get discouraged at the fact that planning cannot and will not change overnight; rather, we should remain cognizant of the fact that progress is ultimately a process. Finally, as we try to better protect ourselves from disasters like Hurricane Katrina, we as a nation must realize that a change of heart in both our planning and our execution is critical to ensuring that our efforts are not in vain.