

# NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW **REDUCING** DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

MICHAEL R. WENGER

JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES  
HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE  
WASHINGTON, DC



**NO MORE KATRINAS:  
HOW **REDUCING** DISPARITIES  
CAN PROMOTE DISASTER  
PREPAREDNESS**

**MICHAEL R. WENGER**

**JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES  
HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE  
WASHINGTON, DC**

This research was funded by the **The California Endowment** Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Opinions expressed in Joint Center publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers, or governors of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies or of the organizations supporting the Center and its research.

Copyright 2008  
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Inc.  
1090 Vermont Ave, NW, Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20005  
[www.jointcenter.org](http://www.jointcenter.org)

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

**CONTENTS**

PREFACE	v
INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: IN THE AFTERMATH OF KATRINA	2
PART TWO: LESSONS LEARNED FOR DISASTER PLANNING AND MITIGATION	5
PART THREE: CORE PRINCIPLES AND A FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS	6
CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS	9
APPENDICES	9
ABOUT THE JOINT CENTER AND ITS HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE	10
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	10



# NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

## PREFACE

In a speech to the nation on September 15, 2005 from New Orleans, President George W. Bush acknowledged the central role of race in the flawed federal response to Hurricane Katrina:

Within the Gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there's also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The legacy of inequality to which President Bush referred is often invisible to many of us until we are confronted by a disaster such as Katrina. We should make no mistake that the racially disparate conditions that led to the post-Katrina tragedy in New Orleans can be found in communities throughout our nation. Unless our disaster preparedness planning recognizes this reality, the Katrina aftermath can and will be repeated elsewhere—in an earthquake in California, in a tornado in Nebraska, in a forest fire in Florida, or in powerful hurricanes in coastal communities on the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico.

Hurricane Katrina riveted the attention of the nation. In doing so, it created a window of opportunity to examine the origins of the social conditions that gave rise to the appalling post-Katrina situation, and to explore the relationship of these conditions to our ability to live healthy lives, build healthy communities, and respond effectively and equitably to disasters. A more complete understanding of these conditions, not only in New Orleans but in communities throughout our nation, will enable us to be better prepared for the next disaster, and will help us to create conditions in which skin color is not a determinant of the degree of suffering endured.

This paper presents a synthesis of findings and themes from a set of background papers commissioned by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Health Policy Institute. It also reflects input provided by California-based stakeholders convened for a meeting in Oakland, California sponsored by the Joint Center, in conjunction with PolicyLink and The California Endowment. The papers were prepared by acknowledged authorities in the field, who sought to explore some of the most fundamental issues underlying the disparate outcomes suffered by people

of color during Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. The authors offer analysis of the social conditions giving rise to the tragic outcomes, the reasons behind the inadequate disaster response, and possible strategies for addressing these social conditions and ensuring effective emergency response planning. The participants in the Oakland discussion, which took place on January 29, 2008, had the opportunity to review drafts of these papers prior to the meeting, and they contributed valuable and practical insights that have helped significantly to inform this final version of the paper.

Credit for developing this project goes to Dr. Gail Christopher, who served as the Joint Center's Vice President for Health, Women and Families and Director of the Health Policy Institute at the time the project was initiated. In turn, Gina E. Wood, the Deputy Director of the Health Policy Institute, has taken on primary responsibility for ensuring the project is completed and its findings widely disseminated. We are also grateful to the authors of the project's background papers, including: Reilly Morse, Katrina Legal Fellow, Mississippi Center for Justice; James H. Carr, former deputy director, Fannie Mae Foundation, in collaboration with H. Beth Marcus, Shehnaz Niki Jagpal, and Nandinee Kutty; Dr. Benjamin Springgate and colleagues Charles Allen, Diana Meyers, Jeanne Lambrew, and Kenneth Wells; Karyn Trader-Leigh, President and CEO of KTA Global Partners; and The Conference of Minority Transportation Officials. In addition, special thanks are accorded to Michael R. Wenger, Joint Center program consultant, for synthesizing the background papers and comments offered during the Oakland meeting into the summary paper that follows. In essence, this paper identifies important core principles that form a social determinants framework for disaster preparedness planning.

In closing, we wish to thank Mildred Thompson, Rajni Banthia, Shireen Malekafzali, and Iman Mills, who did an outstanding job in planning and facilitating the Oakland discussion earlier this year. We also want to thank former Joint Center staff member Susanna Dilliplane, who served as general editor for this paper and our current consultant, Dr. Marsha Renwanz for completing the review and editing of this paper along with the five background submissions. We appreciate the efforts of two Joint Center staff members, Carla Gullatt, who served as project manager and Marco White, who contributed to the design and publication of this paper as well as all the background papers. Most of all, we are grateful for the generous financial support of The California Endowment, which made the entire project possible.

**Ralph B. Everett**  
President and CEO

**Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies**

<sup>1</sup> President Discusses Hurricane Relief in Address to Nation, Jackson Square in New Orleans, LA. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/print/20050915-8.html>



# NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Over the past several years, former Vice President Al Gore has led an important effort to confront us with “an inconvenient truth”—that the reality of global warming poses significant dangers to our planet and we must act now, accepting the inconvenience of personal sacrifice, to face up to the challenges these dangers present. The dangers were vividly illustrated by the power of Hurricane Katrina, whose ferocity, according to many scientists, was fed by the warming of the Atlantic Ocean by as little as one degree.

Amid the devastation wrought by the power of Katrina, however, another “inconvenient truth” was laid bare. In late August and early September of 2005, millions of Americans sat transfixed in front their televisions, watching the gruesome pictures emerging from the tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. They saw people dead or dying. They saw many clinging courageously to life on the roofs of their flooded homes, praying someone would rescue them. They saw others desperately wading through disease-infested water with nothing but the clothes on their backs, seeking refuge wherever they could find it. They saw thousands of families, predominantly people of color, trapped in the squalor of the New Orleans Superdome. As they watched in astonishment, Americans asked the inevitable questions:

How did this tragedy happen?  
Why did it happen?  
Who or what is responsible?  
And how do we make sure it doesn't happen again?

As Reilly Morse observed in his background report, *Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina*:

“One bitter gift from Hurricane Katrina was to refocus America’s attention upon the enduring legacy of racial segregation and poverty in the Gulf South.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, as we seek ways to respond more humanely and effectively to future disasters, we have a window of opportunity to take advantage of Katrina’s “bitter gift” to confront the “inconvenient truth” of pressing racial and ethnic disparities. It is in the compelling national interest that we do so. In addition to the challenges of rebuilding after Katrina, we must anticipate the likelihood of future disasters in locales across the nation. For example, PolicyLink’s Victor Rubin asks, in the wake of a large levee break in the Sacramento River Delta:

<sup>2</sup> Morse, Reilly. 2007. *Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

“What are the equity concerns (in view of) a heightened awareness of the destruction that would occur from a major collapse of California’s inadequately maintained levee system?”<sup>3</sup>

The answer to Victor Rubin’s question and similar questions relevant in communities across the country will require well-thought-out recommendations for policy and program reforms. To ensure that we do not remain woefully unprepared for the next disaster, such policy recommendations must be informed by a deeper and more complete understanding of the root causes of the conditions that made residents of the New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward so much more vulnerable than other city residents. Only a deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities posed by a legacy of concentrated poverty and racial discrimination will enable other communities to take proactive steps to remedy these conditions before the next disaster strikes. Failure to achieve such an understanding increases the risk that there will be tragic repeats of racially biased and incompetent Katrina-like rescue and recovery efforts in the wake of future disasters.

## Overview of the Paper

This paper is organized into three parts. The first part summarizes important themes and findings from five background papers on disaster mitigation. These papers were written to answer several critical questions raised by Katrina’s powerful and tragic repercussions, as follows:

- How did the social conditions that formed the basis of the tragedy arise and why was skin color such a significant factor in determining the degree of suffering?
- Why was the response to the tragedy so delayed, uncoordinated, and inadequate?
- As we anticipate the next disaster, wherever and whenever it may occur, how can we ameliorate the social conditions that invite unequal suffering and how can we plan for an emergency response that ensures that communities of color are no less vulnerable than others to the suffering that was on such vivid display after the wrath of Katrina?

The second part of this summary paper covers lessons learned during a day-long convening on January 29, 2008 in Oakland, California, where the five background

<sup>3</sup> Rubin, Victor. 2006. *Safety, Growth, and Equity: Infrastructure Policies That Promote Opportunity and Inclusion*. Oakland, CA: PolicyLink, 2006. (PolicyLink is a national research and action institute that works collaboratively to develop and implement local, state, and federal policies to achieve economic and social equity).



## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

papers were the subject of intense discussion. This day-long conversation helped to clarify universal themes embodied in the papers and to develop an over-arching framework for ensuring racial and ethnic disparities are addressed in future disaster preparedness efforts. Insights shared by the diverse group of participants in the Oakland convening are laid out in this section.

The third part of this paper outlines recommendations for core principles that provide a framework for effective disaster preparedness planning. Policymakers and responsible members of the public alike will benefit from using this framework to ensure the mistakes made in responding to Katrina are never repeated.

### PART ONE: IN THE AFTERMATH OF KATRINA

The racially disproportionate adverse consequences of Katrina should have come as no surprise. Conditions in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, like those in communities elsewhere in this nation, are the product of clear historic patterns of racial discrimination resulting in dangerous racial and ethnic disparities.

In April, 2006 the Joint Center held a standing room only forum in Washington, D.C. entitled “*Never Again: Themes from a Forum on Disaster Preparedness and Post-Katrina Reconstruction*” in which public officials, scholars, and community advocates discussed ways in which to prevent a repeat of the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.<sup>4</sup> They identified a number of obstacles to progress, including the desire of most people to “play the blame game,” and “dealing with the same roadblocks” any time efforts are made to prepare more effectively for disasters. From the forum emerged a series of lessons that can be learned from the aftermath of Katrina:

- We need to reform public leadership.
- Preparedness is essential for all parties.
- We must recognize the value of community input.
- We must understand and acknowledge the importance of environmental justice.
- The disaster alert system must be modified.
- We cannot wait to act until the next disaster strikes.
- In responding to disasters it is important to preserve the culture of the community.

<sup>4</sup> Proceedings of this forum were published and are available on the Joint Center website. <http://www.jointcenter.org>.

- We must “turn up the noise level” in order to raise awareness of the need for more effective and more equitable disaster planning and responsiveness.
- We need a “change of heart” in order to protect the most vulnerable among us.

The next step was the commissioning of the papers cited below that form the backbone of this project. These papers were written by authors who represent a range of disciplines and have been intimately involved with efforts to rebuild New Orleans. These authors agree that rebuilding efforts in New Orleans must ensure that displaced residents, especially the most vulnerable, are welcomed back with adequate assistance.

These major papers commissioned by the Joint Center Health Policy Institute looked at disaster conditions from unique perspectives, including:

- *Environmental Justice Through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina*, by Reilly Morse, a Katrina Legal Fellow at the Mississippi Center for Justice, chronicles the decisions over more than two centuries that led to the disproportionate impact of Katrina.
- *In the Wake of Katrina: The Continuing Saga of Housing and Rebuilding in New Orleans*, by James H. Carr, until recently the deputy director of the Fannie Mae Foundation, in collaboration with H. Beth Marcus, Shehnaz Niki Jagpal, and Nandinee Kutty, sketches a picture of New Orleans as a “precarious” city unprepared for a disaster of Katrina’s proportions, and then focuses on the widespread destruction in the housing sector and the challenges of rebuilding the city.
- *The Rapid Evaluation and Action for Community Health in Louisiana*, by Dr. Benjamin Springgate and colleagues Charles Allen, Diana Meyers, Jeanne Lambrew, and Kenneth Wells, reports on a four-month project that was designed to identify health care needs, existing resources, gaps in services and solutions to ensuring quality care in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.
- *A White Paper on Emergency Preparedness and Recovery* produced by the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO), explores the degree of change that has occurred in emergency planning with regard to five public transit entities.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

- *Understanding the Role of African American Churches and Clergy in Community Crisis Response*, by Dr. Karyn Trader-Leigh, an authority on organization change, explores the role of African American ministers and churches in pre- and post-Katrina activities in the context of their historical place in the African American community. Although her main focus is the African American faith community, Dr. Trader-Leigh also examines the experiences of the Hispanic and Vietnamese communities in New Orleans.

### Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina<sup>5</sup>

Reilly Morse examines the influences of geography, history, and race, using the lens of environmental justice to illustrate how race played a key role in the settlement patterns that developed in and around New Orleans and in the damage that was incurred as a result of these patterns. He takes us back to 1719, when the first large shipment of Africans arrived in New Orleans, and describes how 140 years of slavery permanently influenced New Orleans life. He explains how Louisiana's white population successfully overthrew Reconstruction and how, in the aftermath of Reconstruction, whites used their economic and political power to select "areas for blacks to occupy that had various disadvantages, such as flooding, unhealthy air, noise, or inadequate streets, water, and sewerage." According to Morse, as recently as 1966, the construction of Interstate 10 "triggered sprawling subdivision development beyond the Industrial Canal into flood-prone swamplands to the east of New Orleans"—affordable multifamily rentals that attracted lower middle-class blacks. The author concludes:

"Racial disparities in storm damage stem from centuries of white control over the characteristics of land occupied by African Americans—low elevations with high exposure to backswamp flooding and poor access to transportation."<sup>6</sup>

Morse suggests that a prerequisite for disaster preparedness in every community is to "gather and record the basic history that created their community and the sequence of events that has led to health and environmental conflicts." He argues: "Compiling community histories is also a vital self-empowerment exercise in that it provides a civil and political identity and erases

the invisibility of communities of color that pervades mainstream history."

### In the Wake of Katrina: The Continuing Saga of Housing and Rebuilding in New Orleans<sup>7</sup>

James H. Carr and his co-authors tell a grim story of government at all levels overwhelmed by the magnitude of Katrina and simply unable to respond in an effective and coordinated manner. While acknowledging that, as the sixth-strongest storm in recorded history of the Atlantic, Katrina's impact would have been disastrous even under the best of circumstances, they agree with Reilly Morse's assessment of "the fragile environment" of New Orleans and his analysis of how "this fragility has been exacerbated over the years" by development decisions that have made the city more flood-prone, especially in the low-lying neighborhoods largely inhabited by people of color. They further note that not only was the city physically vulnerable to a storm such as Katrina, it "had a population that consisted of many people who were also very vulnerable." As evidence, they report that the 2000 Census data on extreme poverty neighborhoods placed New Orleans second among the nation's largest 50 cities. According to Carr and his co-authors:

"Thirty-eight percent of New Orleans' poor lived in these concentrated neighborhoods and one in four of the city's neighborhoods (home to about 100,000 residents) fit the definition of extreme concentrated poverty."<sup>8</sup>

But the authors focus most of their report on the destruction of housing in New Orleans and the efforts to rebuild the city. They describe a process that has been "slow and often chaotic," and today, they assert, "New Orleans still remains a city that is only a remnant of what it was pre-Katrina." They chronicle a series of planning efforts and housing programs that are inadequately funded and often have worked at cross purposes with each other. But they hold out some hope: toward the end of 2006, New Orleans created a central recovery office to manage recovery efforts and appointed an internationally recognized authority to lead the effort. This office has outlined "a five-point recovery strategy for New Orleans" that includes engaging residents in the recovery process and future development; establishing physical and emotional security for residents; using the recovery process to reconfigure infrastructure; diversify-

<sup>5</sup> Morse, Reilly. 2007. *Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Morse, Reilly. 2007. *Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Carr, James H. and H. Beth Marcus, Shehnaz Niki Jagpal, Nandinee Kutty. 2007. *In the Wake of Katrina: The Continuing Saga of Housing and Rebuilding in New Orleans*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

<sup>8</sup> Carr, James H. and H. Beth Marcus, Shehnaz Niki Jagpal, Nandinee Kutty. 2007. *In the Wake of Katrina: The Continuing Saga of Housing and Rebuilding in New Orleans*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 6.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

ing the city and regional economic base; and developing a safe, secure, and environmentally sustainable settlement pattern.

The paper also considers lessons that might be learned from previous disaster responses. From the 1871 Chicago Fire and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, the authors conclude that “the involvement of the affected persons in their own recovery is of critical importance for a successful recovery.” From the 1927 Mississippi Flood and the attacks of September 11, 2001, they conclude that a strong federal leadership role and the mobilization of private industry in the relief efforts are vital. If these lessons are applied, Carr and his colleagues foresee the possibility of a New Orleans that “will be rebuilt and renewed in ways that provide its residents, especially those who bore the greatest brunt of Katrina’s impact due to poverty and racism, with better opportunity and quality of life.”

### Rapid Evaluation and Action for Community Health in Louisiana (REACH-LA)<sup>9</sup>

Over a four-month period, REACH-LA used qualitative research methods to identify and document challenges facing residents seeking access to health care in the Greater New Orleans area in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina’s wide-scale destruction. At the same time, the researchers documented the range of community responses and proposed policy solutions to increase the availability of health care services.

Community members participated in developing the research design, collecting the data and interpreting the results. Working through a Community Advisory Board, the authors collected information from 30 interviews with key informants, four different Community Discussion Groups, and a conference designed to encourage feedback from local residents. Almost uniformly, informants characterized the post-Katrina status of health care services in the greater New Orleans area as representing a severe crisis. They noted the closure of hospitals, clinics and support facilities such as pharmacies, as “devastating,” a problem “compounded by workforce shortages, uncertain and shifting demographics, and specific service gaps.” Equally disturbing, they described a “rise in need and inability to manage mental health disorders...and... unimaginable generational impact.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Springgate, Benjamin and Charles Allen, Diana Meyers, Jeanne Lambrew, Kenneth Wells. 2007. *The Rapid Evaluation and Action for Community Health in Louisiana*. Washington DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Springgate, Benjamin and Charles Allen, Diana Meyers, Jeanne Lambrew, Kenneth Wells. 2007. *The Rapid Evaluation and Action for Community Health in Louisiana*. Washington DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p 2.

At the same time, the participants in the project “were united in their praise of the innovative and collaborative spirit that characterized the local recovery efforts...”<sup>11</sup> They emphasized that, in their view, “a sustainable recovery was...possible only with responsible leadership, transparency, and broad engagement of local community members.” And they saw the current situation as an opportunity “to overcome...historical and current challenges” and to provide “for an enhanced role for primary and preventive care in health services delivery.”

### A White Paper on Emergency Preparedness and Recovery<sup>12</sup>

Because they operate in areas where extensive emergency preparedness activities have occurred, the following five transit authorities were selected for study: Bay Area Regional Transportation (San Francisco Area), Chicago Transit Authority, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority, Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (Houston Metro), and Miami-Dade County Transit. COMTO’s study revealed that in each case emergency response planning has been “stepped up” since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the establishment of directives from the Department of Homeland Security. All of the transit entities are integrated into the chain of command, and in each case there are annual reviews of plans and mock drills to assess readiness. The questions in the COMTO study can serve as a guide to other transit authorities as they assess their preparedness to respond effectively to a natural or man-made disaster.

### Understanding the Role of African American Churches and Clergy in Community Crisis Response<sup>13</sup>

One cannot understand the role of African American ministers in responding to community crises, Dr. Karyn Trader-Leigh asserts, without understanding that the “African American church has a history of being involved in addressing the needs of the African American community.” In her background paper, she charges that:

“Disaster and emergency response planning at the local, state, and federal level reflects how poorly understood the role of churches is as a critical response resource in natural or man-made catas-

<sup>11</sup> Springgate, Benjamin and Charles Allen, Diana Meyers, Jeanne Lambrew, Kenneth Wells. 2007. *The Rapid Evaluation and Action for Community Health in Louisiana*. Washington DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Conference of Minority Transportation Officials. 2007. *A White Paper on Emergency Preparedness and Recovery*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. .

<sup>13</sup> Trader-Leigh, Karyn. 2007. *Understanding the Role of African American Churches and Clergy in Community Crisis Response*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

trophes at the level of community and neighborhood, particularly in minority communities.”<sup>14</sup>

Through research that included a literature review, a series of 27 interviews, and a focus group in New Orleans with nine interdenominational pastors from the city, Dr. Trader-Leigh finds “that the African American Ministers and their denominational institutions played a variety of roles as first responders in mobilizing resources, providing direct services to survivors, brokering relationships with the larger response community, and acting as a moral agent and social justice advocate on behalf of Katrina and Rita evacuees.” Yet, she notes, they “have been basically overlooked in the public policy disaster management framework, even though they have long served as a community-based partner, caregiver, and service provider to the most vulnerable.” During the Oakland convening Dr. Trader-Leigh further characterized the churches as “a critical safety net for vulnerable populations that is triggered when a disaster occurs.” She was supported in these comments by G.L. Hodge, Church Administrator of the Providence Baptist Church in San Francisco, who spoke of the church’s role in providing the practical necessities to keep life functioning during a disaster and in quelling the potential for civil unrest when vulnerable populations are displaced.

Dr. Trader-Leigh offers a series of recommendations and observations that focus on building the capacity of the faith community as disaster response partners, fully including them in the planning and training processes, and recognizing the role of the church “in providing spiritual and psycho-social resilience in the lives of African Americans within their communities during disaster and crisis.”

### PART TWO: LESSONS LEARNED FOR DISASTER PLANNING AND MITIGATION

For the above-summarized papers to have significance beyond the context of New Orleans, it was necessary for them to be carefully examined and critiqued by stakeholders with on-the-ground experience in other states and regions. The decision to hold such a discussion in Oakland was rooted in the reality, as confirmed by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), that California faces a disproportionate burden of such natural disasters as massive fires, mudslides, storms, floods, and earthquakes. . In fact, perhaps the most recent and most consequential urban natural disaster was the Loma Prieta Earthquake, which occurred in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area nearly two decades ago.

<sup>14</sup> Trader-Leigh, Karyn. 2007. Understanding the Role of African American Churches and Clergy in Community Crisis Response. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 3.

The stakeholders who participated in the Oakland convening on January 29, 2008 reviewed all the papers and they provided crucial insights and policy recommendations based on their experiences as grassroots organizers, non-profit employees, disaster preparedness planners, funders, and health department officials.<sup>15</sup> Some of the participants were also veterans of the Loma Prieta disaster. Prior to the convening they had been provided with all of the papers, as well as with a draft version of this synthesis paper. Within the context of the issues set forth in this paper and in the background papers, they focused their attention on the practical realities they confront in dealing with the consequences of disasters. Among the key points they made were as follows:

- Partnerships, collaborative efforts, and close coordination and communication between governments at all levels, the philanthropic sector, and non-profit community-based advocacy groups, both secular and faith-based, are critical to effective planning and to an effective and equitable disaster response.
- A priority of government agencies involved in disaster preparedness should be to recognize the uniqueness of each community and to support a clear and in-depth assessment of each community’s assets, its relevant institutions—both secular and non-secular, and the challenges it confronts. This must include an analysis of historical and current realities that have created inequitable circumstances and how the community’s assets and institutions can be utilized to mitigate these inequities. Critical to such mitigation is the willingness of both public and private officials to acknowledge the inequities and to subordinate their pride and their “turf” to the well-being of all the residents of the community.
- Government agencies involved in disaster planning must promote community-level responses for both natural and man-made disasters by offering financial incentives to intermediary and non-governmental organizations to engage in inclusive disaster preparedness planning and by providing training and technical assistance to these organizations.
- It is critical, particularly in situations where temporary displacement rather than evacuation is called for, to keep life functioning in as normal a manner as possible. This must include

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix II for a list of the participants.



## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

an awareness of and a response to the danger of civil unrest in a manner that protects the most vulnerable populations while recognizing the tensions that may fuel some of this unrest. One option discussed was the feasibility of providing “smart cards” for people that contain all necessary information related to their disaster-created needs, including such items as what prescription medications they are taking.

- Immediate responses to the dangers, as well as the immediate availability of assistance and resources from government and philanthropic agencies, is crucial to minimizing chaos and unrest. The Federal government and state-level governments must be prepared to leverage all available resources—from food stamps to emergency housing and the like—in a streamlined manner to ensure that they may be channeled in a timely way to the disaster-stricken area and to the community-based agencies, both secular and non-secular, that are best situated to respond quickly to people’s needs in the aftermath of a disaster.
- Because disaster preparedness is often not a high priority when no disaster is known to be imminent, efforts must be made to “sell” the importance of disaster preparedness to the population at large, and there must be a special commitment to preparing the most vulnerable populations for the potential disruptions in their lives. Local organizations should devise creative ways of raising awareness of the dangers and likely impacts of a disaster. In this regard the various strategies and materials of CARD (Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters) should be carefully examined.<sup>16</sup> Among CARD’s strategies is mobilizing people on issues of immediate concern to the community, such as racial disparities in incarceration and employment, and using mobilization on these issues as a vehicle for engaging people on the issue of disaster preparedness.
- A system of checks and balances must be built into the system so that agencies can be evaluated and held accountable for their efforts to promote inclusive disaster-preparedness planning, as well as for the effectiveness of their responses.

- Priority in any post-disaster employment opportunities should be given to local residents so long as doing so does not stifle recovery operations. In this regard, community colleges are an often overlooked resource for providing job training and workforce development. They and other local institutions of higher education also can be helpful in compiling the aspects of the community’s history that are relevant to promoting equity in disaster impacts and recovery operations.
- To the maximum feasible degree, planning should be done on a regional basis in order to take advantage of the region’s assets and to spread the potential burdens created by a disaster. This should include not only disaster planning, but also infrastructure and land use planning that impact the region’s institutions and its ability to respond equitably to disasters.
- Philanthropic organizations should:
  - o Include grantee preparedness planning as a requirement in its grants.
  - o Provide grants for business continuation planning.
  - o Maintain an emergency reserve fund.
  - o Compile and maintain a list of organizations that are pre-approved for disaster recovery-grants in order to be able to move quickly to respond to disasters.
  - o Provide disaster recovery funding to non-traditional intermediary organizations, including supplemental funding for related needs such as computer back-up systems and the like.

### PART THREE: CORE PRINCIPLES AND A FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

We see the legacy of racial discrimination most vividly when a disaster like Katrina strikes and the television images of nearly all those left behind in the New Orleans Superdome or stranded on roof tops without water or food were African Americans.

Despite ignorant and mean-spirited comments by people such as Atlanta-based talk-show host Neal Boortz, who declared that addressing the plight of Katrina’s victims was like “emptying a septic tank into the nation’s water supply,” today’s generation of 20-

<sup>16</sup> Further information about CARD may be found online at: <http://www.firstvictims.org>.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

40-year-olds probably are more racially tolerant than any previous generation.<sup>17</sup> In this context, Dr. Trader-Leigh's conclusion rings true: "Most Americans want a better standard of care for vulnerable populations than we observed in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita."<sup>18</sup>

Our policies and planning, both pre-disaster and post-disaster, must be informed by the economic, political, and social structures under which people live and that drive their decision-making processes. A myriad of factors must be taken into account, as listed below:

- How and where people live today;
- The decisions and circumstances that led to today's residential patterns and living conditions;
- How people living in a range of different circumstances understand emergency situations and to whom they turn for help in such situations;
- The resources they have available to deal with emergencies;
- The roles and responsibilities of public officials—local, regional, state, and federal—when confronted with such situations;
- The roles and responsibilities of the private and non-profit sectors, including philanthropic organizations, faith-based institutions, grassroots community organizations, and employers in such situations; and
- Ways in which to help ensure that future development decisions result in greater equity.

For any disaster preparedness planning to be effective, we must proceed within a framework that addresses such social determinants. Based on the background papers and the comments and reflections offered by stakeholders during the day-long session in California, we offer a social determinants framework for disaster preparedness planning. As outlined below, this framework rests on four core principles:

---

<sup>17</sup> This conclusion by the author is based upon his own observations and research as well as a number of personal communications with sociologists and political scientists specializing in race relations.

<sup>18</sup> Trader-Leigh, Karyn. 2007. Understanding the Role of African American Churches and Clergy in Community Crisis Response. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 9.

***1. Every community must have an accurate and complete understanding of the basic history that led to its creation and the sequence of events that has led to the health and environmental disparities and conflicts.***<sup>19</sup>

Reilly Morse recommends that every minority and low-income population must, as a pre-requisite to any planning, gather and record the basic history of their community, and he describes the significant benefits of collecting such histories. It lifts the veil of secrecy that often surrounds the chronology of how the current situation evolved, it empowers minority and low-income communities by helping them to understand the forces that combined to create the situation, and it challenges the charge of "personal responsibility" that is often used to justify community inaction to ameliorate the situation. Such histories should include an understanding of decisions that were made, how and why they were made, the ramifications of these decisions at the time they were made, and the legacy of these decisions. Understanding this history recognizes the uniqueness of each community and can help to inform disaster planning decisions, suggest coalitions of organizations and communities with common interests, and guide future development decisions so that the impacts of future disasters are both minimized and more equitably felt.

***2. A clear and thoughtful analysis that determines how current conditions and attitudes are inter-related and affect the responses of people to disaster situations must be a key element of any disaster planning effort.***

Low-income people and people of color may confront different issues, both tangible and intangible, based on their historical, as well as current experiences, and this must be taken into account in any disaster preparedness planning. Failure to do so will exacerbate already existing inequities and increase the likelihood that the inequities will be further exacerbated in any disaster recovery scheme. Among the practical factors that must be considered in such an analysis are:

- **Availability of Transportation.** Transportation out of an area struck by disaster must not only be timely, but also must connect to a destination that is prepared to care for and empower the evacuees, both in the short-term and longer recovery period.
- **Availability of Resources.** Resources must include those that are immediately available to the individual and those that may be available

---

<sup>19</sup> Morse, R. 2007. Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 52.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

in the future, as well as information on when those future resources will be available and ways in which to access them. For people who rely on monthly stipends to survive, no matter from what source, the time of the month in which the disaster occurs and their ability to receive mail wherever they have been re-located may have a major impact on the availability of resources. Beyond monetary resources, many rely on extended family members for such things as child care and other essentials in their lives. Re-location in the wake of a disaster may separate families from such resources, and this must be factored into any disaster planning equation.

- **Recognition of Varying Needs and Priorities.** Those who have little may well be far more protective of what they do have and far more reluctant to leave anything behind. Moreover, those who have had little experience in traveling beyond the confines of their neighborhoods may find re-adjustment to new circumstances and surroundings far more challenging than those who have traveled more extensively.
- **Level of Education, Language Fluency, and Job Skills.** Clearly, levels of education and literacy, as well as language barriers, substantially affect how effectively people are able to react to guidance, whether written or verbal, in responding to a disaster. These factors also affect how well people are able to adjust to new situations, whether temporary or permanent, and the kinds of assistance they will need—relocation, job search, and the like—in order to adjust.
- **Access to Health Care.** Low-income people often have greater and more urgent health needs than others. Furthermore, they often are reluctant to accept care from providers with whom they are not familiar. This issue can be compounded for people of color and immigrants by the stress of discrimination, chronic illnesses that have not been adequately treated in the past, and the cultural competence—or lack thereof—of health care providers.
- **Access to Affordable Housing.** Low-income people, even those who may have owned their own home, will find it more difficult to find replacement housing they can afford and for which they can qualify financially, and people

of color often will find it more difficult to be accepted in communities to which they are re-located depending on the racial make-up of the community.

- **Whom Do You Trust?** Low-income people and people of color, largely because they feel that their interests previously have been ignored by decision makers, are reluctant to trust instructions from such decision makers on how to respond to an emergency situation. This goes directly to the essence of the Trader-Leigh paper on the importance of the faith community in both disaster response planning and implementation. Also, low-income people and people of color, because they may be perceived as more vulnerable, often are targeted by unscrupulous people who are trying to benefit from the misery of others. Thus, they may require greater protection from such people.

### ***3. Inclusiveness in disaster preparedness planning is a key factor in determining whether any plan will be effective and whether it will be accepted by the most vulnerable populations.***

For a variety of reasons, disaster planning largely has been the province of professional responders, public officials, and private sector leaders. Clearly, people in these positions must have a primary role in such planning. However, far too often, they do not take into account the unique needs of the most vulnerable, because they are not aware of these needs, do not fully understand them, or simply do not consider them of sufficient importance. This has been evident not only in disaster planning, but in development planning generally.<sup>20</sup> Only by including people who live with these needs on a daily basis, as well as clergy who serve them, public officials who represent them, and others who understand the situations of the least advantaged among us and are advocates for their needs, can emergency response plans fully and fairly reflect these needs. Equally important, if community members are included in the planning process, they will be more aware of the dangers they will confront, will be more likely to respond to guidance consistent with the plan because they understand it better, will have greater trust in it, and will feel a level of ownership of the plan.

### ***4. A community-based process of achieving racial and ethnic justice and reconciliation is a pre-condition to establishing the level of trust and understanding that is essential to bridging local racial and ethnic***

<sup>20</sup> This conclusion by the author is based upon his own review of the literature as well as the proceedings of the January 29, 2008 convening sponsored by the Joint Center and PolicyLink.

## NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

### *divisions in communities and ensuring an equitable response to future disasters.*

Such a process can take many forms, and they will be explored in an additional forthcoming background paper. The recommendations contained herein and in the background papers will help to facilitate the process. It must be understood that until there is a serious effort to understand the injustices of the past, both nationally and in local communities, and to undertake efforts, both to redress past injustices and to ensure equity in future planning and policymaking, we will continue to see inevitable inequities in the impact of disasters.

Disaster preparedness planning that rests on these core principles should not be viewed simply as benefiting communities of color and low-income communities. Adherence to these principles is, in fact, critical for the entire society. As Morse noted with regard to the Gulf Coast:

“This region has paid an extraordinarily high and unnecessary price for its long history of discrimination against racial minorities and its refusal to rectify systematic economic impoverishment. Ultimately, that price is a shared debt of all Americans, spiritual as well as financial. If this nation truly embraces the sanctity of human life, then it must more forcefully employ the precautionary principle to protect life, from local land-use and zoning decisions to conservation of natural resources, and from the regulation of pollutants and toxins to how we fit our most disadvantaged fellow citizens into the fabric of our communities.”<sup>21</sup>

Morse could have been referring to the entire nation. Thus, as we consider the specific recommendations contained in the background papers, we must recognize that persistent racial and ethnic discrimination, like global warming, is an inconvenient truth that will require honesty, courage, and personal sacrifice to overcome. Failure to recognize this truth and to commit the resources necessary to ultimately achieve a truly equitable society will condemn us to a future in which the gruesome post-Katrina pictures will be an increasingly frequent aftermath of disasters.

### CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

More often than not, analyses and reports of disasters and their aftermaths are skimmed in cursory fashion by those in authority and then quickly consigned to a

shelf to gather dust. This was of primary concern to the stakeholders in the Oakland meeting, who made the point that they had participated in meetings like this in the past to no long-term avail. It also was a major concern raised earlier in the “Never Again” forum, during which participants asserted that “the noise level” must be raised. The Joint Center, PolicyLink, and the California Endowment, co-conveners of the Oakland meeting, expressed a strong commitment to raising “the noise level” by ensuring the widest possible distribution of this paper and the background papers. The Joint Center plans to disseminate these documents through the member organizations of the National Policy Alliance (see appendix for NPA member organizations), who represent the more than 10,000 black elected officials at every level of government throughout the country, as well as the more than 3 million black employees of government.

Ultimately, however, it is up to those at the community level who are engaged as disaster preparedness planners and responders to raise “the noise level.” They must become advocates at the local, state, and national levels. If they can come together to make their voices heard, change will occur. And the fact that “change” has become the most prominent buzz word in this Presidential election cycle may be an encouraging sign that we can and will be better prepared in the future for a more equitable response to disasters.

### APPENDIX I—MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY ALLIANCE

Congressional Black Caucus  
National Black Caucus of State Legislators  
National Association of Black County Officials  
National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials  
National Conference of Black Mayors  
World Conference of Mayors  
National Black Caucus of School Board Members  
Judicial Council of the National Bar Association  
Blacks In Government  
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

<sup>21</sup> Morse, Reilly. 2007. Environmental Justice through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, p. 54.



# NO MORE KATRINAS: HOW REDUCING DISPARITIES CAN PROMOTE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

## APPENDIX II—PARTICIPANTS IN THE OAKLAND MEETING CONVENING ON DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PARTICIPANT LIST

Rajni Banthia, PolicyLink

Mark Bartolini

Dr. Muntu Davis, Alameda County Public Health  
Department

Dr. Sheila Davis

W. Montague Cobb/NMA Health Institute

Renee Domingo  
California Community Colleges

Cecilia Echeverria, The California Endowment

Rich Eisner, Fritz Institute

Dr. June Gin, Fritz Institute

Angela Glover Blackwell, PolicyLink

Carla Gullatt  
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

G.L. Hodge, Providence Baptist Church

Daniel Kikuo Ichinose, M.A.  
Asian Pacific American Legal Center

Ana-Marie Jones, Collaborating Agencies Responding to  
Disasters (CARD)

Jordan Klein, United Way of the Bay Area

Zerlyn Ladua, R.N., F.N.P., M.S.N.  
Bioterrorism/Public Health Emergency Preparedness

Shireen Malekafzali, PolicyLink

Iman Mills, PolicyLink

Reilly Morse, Mississippi Center for Justice

Thomas Parker, COMTO National

Kalima Rose, PolicyLink

Bernie Smith, Madera County Public Health  
Department

Marion Standish, The California Endowment

Dong Suh, MPP, Asian Health Services

Mildred Thompson, PolicyLink

Dr. Karyn Trader-Leigh, KTA Global Partners

Michael Wenger, Joint Center for Political and  
Economic Studies

Sandra Witt, Alameda County Public Health  
Department

Kent Woo, MSW NICOS Chinese Health Coalition

Andrea Zussman, The San Francisco Foundation

## ABOUT THE JOINT CENTER AND ITS HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is one of the nation's pre-eminent research and public policy institutions and the only one whose work focuses exclusively on issues of particular concern to African Americans and other people of color. For over three decades, our research and information programs have informed and influenced public opinion and national policy to benefit not only African Americans, but every American.

The mission of the Joint Center Health Policy Institute (HPI) is to ignite a "Fair Health" movement that gives people of color the inalienable right to equal opportunity for healthy lives. HPI's goal is to help communities of color identify short- and long-term policy objectives and related activities in key areas.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael R. Wenger, of Mitchellville, Maryland, has served the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in a number of capacities and currently as program consultant. He is an adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology, specializing in race relations, at The George Washington University. Mr. Wenger came to the Joint Center in October, 1998, after serving as the Deputy Director for Outreach and Program Development for President Clinton's Initiative on Race.

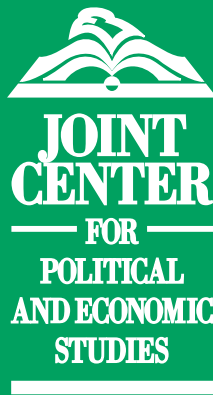
## JOINT CENTER STAFF ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gina E. Wood, Deputy Director  
Joint Center Health Policy Institute

Carla Gullatt, Director of Operations & Outreach  
Joint Center Health Policy Institute

Marco A. White  
Creative Designer

Marsha E. Renwanz, Ph.D.  
Consultant



Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies  
1090 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20005  
[jointcenter.org](http://jointcenter.org)



This product is printed on paper that is 50% recycled, 25% post consumer, Elemental Chlorine Free (ECF), and acid free.

