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Poverty & Race Research Action Council

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Hurricane Katrina: Lessons for HUD from the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake

The Administration's approach to re-housing poor families displaced by Hurricane Katrina has been to urge (and in some cases, direct) local housing authorities and assisted housing providers around the country to open vacant units. This is a good start, but it places many housing agencies (already struggling with inadequate supply) in the difficult position of choosing between needy displacees and local families in desperate need of housing, some of whom are also homeless. Funding for new housing assistance – both new construction to make up for housing that has been lost and rental vouchers to provide stable housing for displaced families – must be made available as soon as possible.

There is a precedent for a strong HUD and Congressional response in the aftermath of the Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles in 1994. Less than two days after the earthquake, when the scope of damage was becoming clear, then-Secretary Cisneros dispatched virtually the entire senior staff at HUD to Los Angeles to help with the relief effort. Unused funds were reprogrammed from other HUD programs to pay for new Section 8 housing vouchers for earthquake victims. Three large centers were set up in Los Angeles city parks to process displaced families' applications for housing assistance, and Secretary Cisneros dispatched HUD staff from all the West Coast HUD offices to man the centers. Secretary Cisneros himself stayed in Los Angeles to oversee these efforts for much of the next six weeks. By the time the relief effort was concluded several months later, up to 14,000 new vouchers had been distributed.

According to a 2004 University of California study, federal disaster relief following the Northridge earthquake totaled \$12 billion, with HUD allocating \$200 million in emergency housing vouchers and \$200 million in HOME and CDBG funds for the recovery. At that time, FEMA recognized the importance of directing all housing related assistance through a central federal agency, and HUD took the lead, working with local housing authorities to deliver assistance.

Another important lesson from HUD's response to the Los Angeles earthquake was the success the agency had in placing poor families in a wider range of neighborhoods than the types of areas where they had previously lived. When the supply of new apartments seemed to be lagging, the department made a major recruitment effort to attract new landlords to the program, and worked especially to find units outside of higher poverty areas. The end result was that the distribution of Section 8 families in the region was much different after the earthquake than before, with many families now living in safer, more economically integrated neighborhoods with better schools. In contrast, many of

the currently vacant public housing units that will be offered to victims of Katrina will be in some of our poorest and most segregated areas.

In contrast to 1994, the most recent disaster relief bill passed by Congress offers no new money for housing vouchers for eligible displaced families to rent private apartments. A separate bill now pending in the Senate, sponsored by Senator Sarbanes, would rectify this omission by providing \$3.5 billion for temporary housing vouchers for approximately 360,000 families displaced by the hurricane.

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Sources

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"Learning From the Northridge Earthquake," in Recent Research Results (HUD Office of Policy Development & Research, 1994)
<http://www.huduser.org/periodicals/rrr/mitigate.html>

Interviews with participants in the 1994 relief effort