

## Addressing Race and Poverty in the Hurricane Aftermath

by Brigette Rouson

**K**atrina, the storm that quickly became a household name, has overshadowed every hurricane to hit U.S. shores to date. As a result, the nonprofit sector's responsibility to keep critical issues such as race, immigration, and poverty on the table—even when they are no longer in the popular stream—is more widely acknowledged.

Capacity builders that support nonprofit organizations have found themselves pressed to take immediate action while also working toward long-term change. In this article, we focus on the efforts of *Alliance*-member capacity builders to ensure that issues of race and poverty are addressed in the recovery and rebuilding. We have heard from members who are involved in facilitating community response to assisting evacuees, ensuring people of color and other displaced residents are represented in policy decisions, offering training and services to nonprofits that have been affected, and amplifying the systemic issues on a national level.

For a short time after Katrina, the nation was talking more openly about race and poverty, local and global politics, gender and generation, environment and economy, schools and business—and the role of government and relief organizations. As the sizzle died down, nonprofits and capacity builders have been powerfully reminded of how quickly critical issues can fade from popular view. We also saw even more clearly that nonprofit organizations facing the same imbalances in wealth and power found among individuals, can themselves be fragile.

Amid tales of destruction, stumbling, and puzzlement is a story of *Alliance* members right in the thick of the response—paying attention to the immediate and the long term. Indeed, the unique role played by capacity builders, and the public interest efforts they support, continues to be essential to rebuilding. Part of that role is to set a learning agenda about nonprofit readiness, civic engagement, and culturally appropriate responses.

Alliance for Nonprofit Management  
1899 L Street NW 6th Floor  
Washington DC 20036

t 202 955 8406  
f 202 721 0086

info@allianceonline.org  
www.allianceonline.org

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### Makani Themba-Nixon, The Praxis Project

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*“Katrina has really exposed a ‘perfect storm’ of public and private sector neglect... Even nonprofits on which many of us believed we could depend seemed to fall short—especially in communities most affected. People on the ground are working to bridge real gaps in policy, services, resources and more while dealing with tremendous physical and emotional stress.”*

## Race, Poverty, and Accountability

*Alliance* members in affected areas are actively engaged in recovery efforts. Some sustained serious damage directly and others are working with communities that experienced an influx of hurricane survivors. Jackie Dozier is based in the Shreveport, Louisiana area where some 5,000 evacuees were situated as of December 2005. Dozier, an active member of the *Alliance* People of Color Affinity Group with an abiding interest in faith-based organizations, has her own consulting company and works for Family Life Community Development Corporation as programs administrator. She has made it her business to take part in meetings where decisions are being made or resources identified.

Dozier has found that the challenge is to promote inclusion while urging community institutions to rise above turf protection and historical tensions, such as between churches and secular community organizations.

“I know what my heart and head and skills say,” said Dozier, “but we’re dealing with people and their emotions. This [rising above tensions] is what we need to step up to the plate. We’re talking about long-term recovery, seven to eight years. We need help, people who look like these evacuees, who are not in it to fatten their coffers.”

A major concern of Dozier’s is that large nonprofits receive the bulk of hurricane-related grants and contracts, while most small to mid-size groups strain to meet the needs of huge numbers of evacuees with the same level of resources they previously had (or less, where donor fatigue sets in). With projections of 80,000 to 120,000 evacuees coming to the Shreveport area as residents of Southern Louisiana begin returning home, she is naming the dilemma and seeking solutions now.

As she found, problems can be exacerbated by a lack of inclusiveness in planning. Every meeting is a stage—but key actors were missing in the wake of the disaster. “You know, there was a lot of pre-work already being done, and we [people of color] weren’t well represented,”

said Dozier. “But they said this is the beginning of future meetings where we’re going to be bringing folks together.”

Some meetings have been almost all White and some have been predominately Black, without enough convenings that bring groups together or go beyond Black and White. However, even in diverse groups, Dozier found, the people in the room often came with a legacy of mistrust, power struggles, and limited experience with stakeholder engagement. Grassroots and social-change groups typically traveled in different circles than the highly visible and well-funded organizations. In the hurricane aftermath, the questions arise: Who will be in on pivotal meetings? How will resources be allocated? Whose constituent base and agenda will be represented?

These questions fuel efforts of *Alliance* newcomers and longtime members alike, such as Ron Chisom of People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, and Gus Newport, who has held numerous leadership posts within the field and served on the *Alliance* board. Newport was most recently tapped by Vanguard Foundation as director of hurricane relief programs. He is spending much of his time in New Orleans. At first, he focused intensely on access to effective mental health services. “You have a lot of people who’ve freaked out,” said Newport. “The rate of suicide is increasing. A lot of young people who’ve been displaced are coming up with all kinds of violence in the schools that they’re in.”

Policy is never far from direct service, and Newport uses a dual approach. “I’m involved in working with people around new policy, but also trying to stop policy that is not a benefit,” he said. “And it’s a tough task.”

For instance, Newport supports community-led initiatives and he questions proposals being thrust on New Orleans from outside, such as legislation to set up mostly charter schools, eliminating rather than strengthening the public schools that existed. He advances such solutions as land banking by grassroots organizations, rather than

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simply letting land ownership be determined by an individual’s ability to pay a mortgage, construct or restore a building, or navigate the legal system. That kind of bold move requires strong nonprofits with foresight, working together and aligned with grassroots leadership. As more homes and small commercial buildings are bulldozed before residents have an opportunity to weigh in, such approaches become even more significant.

“You’ve got people, national organizations coming in . . . but they’re just working with the powers that be,” Newport observed. “Major organizations don’t understand about racism.”

That is where Chisom and the People’s Institute enter the picture. As co-founder of one of the nation’s best known anti-racism training organizations, Chisom offers wisdom from a quarter century of building the will and the skill to move beyond racism. In addition to continuing its trademark trainings, People’s Institute is helping organize and follow up on meetings of New Orleans residents, such as one held December 10, 2005. Displaced residents came from all over the country.

“The purpose is to make sure that the city gets rebuilt and poor people are not left out,” said Chisom. “You know, poor people, if they’re going to be treated the same way [as before], don’t want to come back. So we’re meeting with the city administration to make sure that as people come back, they’re going to be treated respectfully.”

The People’s Institute also guides people who are visiting to assess the situation firsthand, and is beginning a newsletter to offer a people’s perspective on Katrina. Chisom emphasizes that the entire nation faces this set of issues. “We’re looking for everybody to be involved,” said Chisom. “This is a national issue. People say we’re so sorry about what happened in New Orleans. We say, no, learn from this because it can happen everywhere. Forms of racism act out everywhere.” Indeed, People’s Institute filed a petition with the United Nations for a full investigation, citing likely human rights violations in the U.S. government’s failure to take adequate preventive action, then delay and mishandling of rescue operations.

For Chisom, like most nonprofit leaders in the Gulf Coast, it was imperative to start disaster response at a personal and organizational level. The days just after the hurricane were devoted to finding survivors and beginning to recuperate. “We have 11 staff people and that means 11 families, and all 11 lost everything,” Chisom recalled. “The national office was totally wiped out. We lost computers, we lost history, we lost pictures, everything.” For now, the organization is being run out of a residence in Texas, but that has not stopped Institute trainers from criss-crossing the country to offer training.

Another *Alliance* member, National Community Development Institute (NCDI), was literally on the scene in those first hours of the announced evacuation of New Orleans, preparing to convene HIV/AIDS service providers. They set a “rain date” to gather in Texas—only to be stopped by the Hurricane Rita evacuation. Currently, NCDI is incorporating hurricane response into ongoing efforts.

Dahnes Medora, director of organizational services, explained, “We’re working to support 10 AIDS services organizations that are located in the South, from El Paso to the west and Savannah to the east, as part of a peer-mentoring program. We get together, identify issues and do problem-solving.” Points of exchange include how to support existing clients in addition to newcomers and ways to address demographic changes.

The conditions are anything but business as usual. “The groups we are working with are largely in the impacted areas,” Medora noted. “Two of the people we’re working with lost their homes and are living in FEMA trailers.” NCDI is extending its assistance and offering extra time pro bono, especially to help set priorities. A major theme is community self-determination. (See Medora’s perspective in this edition of *Enhance*.)

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## Amplifying Voices and Monitoring Progress

Also honoring the importance of support for grassroots-led efforts are *Alliance* members Third Sector New England (TSNE), publisher of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. TSNE collected and matched contributions for organizations such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), which responded by directly assisting displaced New Orleans members with housing, credit, food assistance and organizing on broader issues of social change. At town hall meetings in more than 30 locations, residents formed the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association (see [www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org)). Its purpose has been to “amplify the voice of constituents for social change,” making sure that everyone’s views, “including the most marginalized,” inform the rebuilding process.

*The Nonprofit Quarterly (NPQ)* quickly began what promises to be a recurring special section on Katrina and the issues raised by it. Editors jointly announced the commitment “to join nonprofits in the Gulf Coast region and around the nation to monitor and publicly call out bad actors in government and business—but especially among nonprofits,” and “highlight good practice as well as bad.” Rick Cohen, of National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, in a commentary in *NPQ*, pressed the sector to insist on action items. They include: government responsibility to pay for reconstruction, better funding of those in need including 46 million Americans without health insurance, monitoring corporate abuses, reshaping philanthropy, and rebuilding democracy.

Ruth McCambridge, *NPQ* editor-in-chief, told us, “We see this as a situation in which all things will be intensified. That includes the deep inequities that already existed down there, the lack of engagement of people in building that area into a community that benefits all of the residents.”

“Institutionalized racism exists across the country, and we can look at people in the delta area and say what a horrible scene that was, and say that’s not us. But it is in fact all of us,” said McCambridge. “Wherever we sit, in

all of our work, we need to be looking for those situations where we think that representation is unfairly skewed, decision making is unfairly skewed, and resources and power are not being shared properly. That’s our work every single day. But now we’re shown the drastic results of letting go for centuries.” She believes that there is value in reflecting on what is happening. “This situation has the potential of creating an enormous amount of learning for the sector.”

America Speaks also worked to amplify voices in the storm’s aftermath. The group, which includes *Alliance* member Tonya Gonzalez’s consortium to advance deliberative democracy, facilitated a historic conference on Louisiana renewal after Katrina. The conference was a collaboration by mainstream organizations such as American Institute of Architects and American Planning Association. Many evacuees were not in state and were unable to attend, but participants who came crafted a body of principles to guide long-range recovery. America Speaks published a blog and recommendations on its website.

### Cultural Competency Initiative

The *Alliance* Cultural Competency Initiative aims to bring an equity lens to capacity building to address the challenges that communities face, especially at the intersection of race and poverty. The Initiative provides online resources, research and training for capacity builders. Initially, the emphasis is on race/ethnicity, including ways it relates to other cultural identities. Ultimately, culturally based capacity building has the potential to foster nonprofit effectiveness by increasing the practice of cultural competency across the board, so that nonprofits can play a key role in social transformation. To date, the Initiative has received major funding from The UPS Foundation, and additional support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. See [www.allianceonline.org/about/cc\\_resources.page](http://www.allianceonline.org/about/cc_resources.page).

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## Restoring Campuses and Community Service

New Orleans has been home to three historically Black universities: Dillard, Southern, and Xavier. Xavier University of Louisiana, after the devastation of flooding, has reopened its campus with somewhat smaller numbers. (Southern has also reopened, and Dillard is holding classes at a major hotel due to the severity of damage.) *Alliance* member Gene D'Amour, Xavier's senior vice president for resource development, was immersed in setting up temporary offices at a college in Baton Rouge for 45 people in eight of the university's units, then identifying housing for faculty and staff (including an estimated 50 to 60 trailers on the football field). He also was active in contacting congressional and agency officials in Washington to inform them about the situation and urge assistance, as well as his main task of generating funds for the university.

Xavier produces a substantial number of African-American graduates in sciences, including one in four Black pharmacists. By December, the university had raised about \$4 million in foundation grants. Now it is seeking adequate financial aid for students, plus federal appropriations for higher education institutions in the area to rebuild. The rebuilding at Xavier alone will take more than \$30 million, said D'Amour, and construction needs to be completed quickly, over 6 to 9 months. For Xavier, advocating with policymakers at the federal, state and local level has been critical, if not always successful.

Faculty and staff layoffs were severe. Nearly a third, including tenured faculty were laid off, amid efforts to extend health insurance coverage as long as possible for those the university was forced to cut. On a more positive note, Xavier brought back about 98 percent of students in its renowned pharmacy program, and more than two-thirds of undergraduates.

Beyond the classes and construction, Xavier will be working to find and restore ties to nonprofits, including a robust community service and American Humanics program, plus eight pharmacy clinics across the city. (Xavier's work in the community is featured in a book by

*Alliance* board member David Maurrasse, entitled *Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities*.)

Most recently, Xavier students launched a community service initiative sponsored by the University's Center for Student Leadership and Service (the Center). Students took on working with nonprofits to help restore elderly residents' homes and children's playgrounds, hold a health fair, assist at a food bank, do neighborhood clean-up, and even make hot sauce. “We've really always done these community plunges several times a year,” said Kimberly Reese, assistant dean and director of the center. She estimated that 1,000 students would be participating over the spring semester. In addition, efforts are being made to assist nonprofits by providing space on campus to recruit and directly supply volunteers. Some serve as mentors, while others are attached to classes—such as communication students who are preparing public service announcements for nonprofits. The Center also offered more than \$10,000 in grants for school teachers to implement service-learning programs.

Involvement in policy also serves the sector. More than 100 Xavier students enrolled in an Emerging Leaders Program are discussing initiatives to rebuild New Orleans and conducting a letter writing campaign to Congress on federal legislation needed to support recovery. Dr. Norman Francis, Xavier University president, heads a governor's rebuilding commission and continues to look out for New Orleans' higher education institutions as well as promoting cross-sector interests. However, in many settings where decisions are being made, D'Amour expressed concern that (generally, aside from university-based residents and a modest core of community members who have returned), “African Americans are not in the process, and I don't think people are *not* trying to bring African Americans into the process. They're just not here.”

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## Rising Above Tough Times

Elsa Rios, an *Alliance* member consultant who frequently works with Latino organizations, from her New York base has been tracking responses by national groups such as National Council of La Raza (NCLR). NCLR paid visits to rebuilding worksites where many immigrant workers have been unpaid or underpaid while not being assured of basic supports such as housing, clean water and food. (Government contracts often have hundreds of subcontractors who hire laborers to do the job, then tell them that they cannot be paid until payment is received on the subcontract—leaving workers without wages for weeks or months, sometimes permanently.)

As a result of Katrina, Rios is now volunteering with the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative to further its human rights advocacy. Using the human rights framework, she said, means working to secure residents’ right to return, self-determination, fair valuation and process for property, environmental justice and economic fairness—all with reference to important legal principles for nations like the U.S. that have signed on to honor this part of international law.

Rios is among many *Alliance* members who have offered to assist nonprofits with grantwriting or other assistance, once the community members themselves decide what they want. As part of an advisory group within the *Alliance* People of Color Affinity Group (POC), she is interested in connecting with members “to raise money, [or] facilitate consensus building and effective planning to ensure that communities of color feel empowered and provided with the necessary resources to build new, culturally and economically vibrant communities in that area.”

The POC is assessing the needs and opportunities, sharing information to raise awareness, and generating support—including funds to continue the involvement of *Alliance* members who were directly affected. In a phone meeting to explore problems and possibilities, the POC heard from people directly involved in the recovery including Russell Henderson, organizer with the new Rebuilding Louisiana Coalition, *Alliance* member

Gene D’Amour of Xavier University of Louisiana, Jackie Dozier, and Ron McKinley of National Network of Grantmakers. These efforts are being guided by the POC Leadership Team, Monica Herrera (chair), Margo Bailey, Jim Milner and Dahnesha Medora.

Across a wide range of geographic areas and expertise, *Alliance* members have been active in circulating updates, collecting and making donations, forming friendships and serving as allies on policy action. In the nation’s capital, Beth Applegate, a contributing writer for the *Alliance*’s Cultural Competency Initiative, and her life partner Trish Kerle reached out to New Orleans evacuees housed in Washington, DC. Beth is the president of Applegate Consulting Group, an organization development practice focusing on progressive social change movements.

“I believe the personal is political,” she said, “and I continually look for opportunities to actualize my core values through my professional and personal commitment to antiracism work. Organizing to help support Gulf Coast evacuees in their transition was an obvious choice to make.” Beth and Trish tapped friends, colleagues, community and religious groups to provide direct support. They learned important lessons along the way. “We were mindful of the stories about people who tried to help, but missed the point. A quote shared by a friend guided all of our efforts: ‘Help is help when it is asked for, when it is given the way it’s needed, when it is given with humility and received with dignity.’” As a result of Katrina, Applegate participated in a six-week study circle focused on the effects of race and ethnicity in the Silver Spring, Maryland community, considering the difference along ethnic lines in views about the disaster. In addition, Beth has completed Study Circle Facilitator Training offered by the public schools. She currently is working with IMPACT Silver Spring and Diversity Management Institute at Montgomery College, designing a cross-race dialogue to be offered this year.

## Data, Dollars, Action!

National organizing efforts by *Alliance* members have been equally strong. Shortly after the storm and the rescue problems witnessed by the world, Makani Themba-Nixon of The Praxis Project spearheaded a new website that connects information with action. At [www.katrinaaction.org](http://www.katrinaaction.org), visitors can find current developments and quickly send a message to policymakers. E-mail alerts are sent periodically to urge people across the nation to speak up for democracy and just solutions. Topics include emergency housing deadlines and food stamps, as well as longer-term questions such as eminent domain—the government practice of seizing property for public necessity and paying what the government determines to be a fair value. The website also offers a wealth of links to “real relief now,” including the *Alliance* as a source of consultants. This effort dovetails with Themba-Nixon’s founding of Praxis to build capacity for advocacy to promote health justice for communities of color.

“If we do not act with some strategic insight as capacity builders, to support others in their efforts to improve the quality of lives, then we are neither capacity builders nor even advocates,” she said. “Nonprofits, truth be told, are key economic engines in some states, the social welfare system in some, and the place where millions turn to in times of trouble. Without some reflection on how events like these affect our work, we cannot effectively meet the community needs right in our face much less get ahead of the curve.”

“Katrina has really exposed a ‘perfect storm’ of public and private sector neglect,” said Themba-Nixon. “Even nonprofits on which many of us believed we could depend seemed to fall short—especially in communities most affected. People on the ground are working to bridge real gaps in policy, services, resources and more while dealing with tremendous physical and emotional stress.” Praxis Project has focused on how to support survivor leadership and provide opportunities for people

to connect to and support local efforts. (For commentary by her and others on the larger issues, visit the blog [www.seeingblack.com](http://www.seeingblack.com))

Ron McKinley, executive director of National Network of Grantmakers (NNG), arranged an early September national conference call of funders to consult key grassroots leaders and find ways of responding in concert. Shortly after, the NNG website posted Katrina-related funding activities. Next, the NNG annual conference in October brought grantmakers together to identify principles and common goals, and share practices. In assessing impact and next steps, participants paid attention to a spectrum of groups involved in the disaster—African, Latino, Asian, European, and Native ancestry, rural urban residents—plus regional culture and power dynamics.

In the funding response for the Gulf coast, community foundations obviously play a key role. *Alliance* members such as Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham (Alabama) were central in creating or augmenting special funds, including a fund for women affected by the disasters, while offering direct support to colleagues such as the Greater New Orleans Foundation.

Another critical item has been media coverage, which remains prominent on the agendas of The Praxis Project and NNG. Many capacity builders are calling the question about media accuracy and inclusiveness. Alyson Parham, an independent consultant based in Chicago with clients in the Gulf region, pointed out that “what I’m hearing from my clients is very different from what we hear in the news.” Namely, many communities outside New Orleans have suffered, yet received little attention or resources, she explained. Parham is a founder and leader of the *Alliance* Faith-Based Capacity Builders Affinity Group. She also exercised formative leadership in the POC that led to the Cultural Competency Initiative.

*The Alliance continues to update an extensive Katrina resources web page set up in September, 2005, highlighting grassroots groups and other resources to assist in disaster response and recovery. Also, our online Cultural Competency Resource Pages call attention to relevant information for culturally appropriate nonprofit support with relevance to disasters. See [www.allianceonline.org](http://www.allianceonline.org). If your organization is active in the Gulf Coast region, or you have valuable information to share with colleagues about disaster readiness or response, and other critical issues raised by Katrina, please let us know by e-mailing PULSE! News Editor Martha Iraheta, [PulseNews@allianceonline.org](mailto:PulseNews@allianceonline.org).*