

# Picking Up The Pieces

*Hurricane Katrina forced organizing groups to stretch to their limits, but it also showcased their strengths as never before*

**By Miriam Axel-Lute**

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[The Organizers Active on the Gulf Coast](#)

At the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, Oprah is on the PA system. It's early September 2005, and the stadium is full of evacuees from New Orleans. Oprah is telling them that God is going to take care of them. An organizer with The Metropolitan Organization (TMO) tells a colleague who has just arrived that it's going to be hard to get the PA system away from Oprah. Celebrities have been parading in and out all the time, being extraordinarily patronizing, he says.

Not deterred, a leader working with the newly formed Survivors Leadership Group, which TMO has been organizing since the evacuees got here, grabs the mic as soon as the big shots are done. "We're still having this survivors meeting, and if you think God might want you to get off your duff and be part of the solution, you might want to come," is how TMO lead organizer Renee Wizing-Barrios remembers the announcement. Out of that meeting and several more that follow in the first week at the Astrodome, the survivors group launches a petition drive aimed at local, state and federal officials calling for immediate action on five items: emergency financial assistance; transition to dignified living outside the shelters; a database of survivors for tracking down loved ones; keeping phone companies from turning off cell phone service, because phones were essential lifelines for tracking down friends and family; and a long-term recovery package.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was a bewildering blur of activity for pretty much everyone on the Gulf Coast, and the grassroots organizing groups of the region were no exception. Organizers and members lost homes and were displaced by the thousands. Others took people into their homes and volunteered at the shelters.

But it didn't take long for them to start doing what they do best – organizing.

"Immediately, our thought was, what could we bring to the table that other people could not bring," recalls Sister Christina Stephens, supervisor of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), of which TMO is a member. "Given the scope of the tragedy, we could make sure the people coming out of New Orleans were not just treated like victims. We demanded that people be treated like citizens."

Of course it wasn't quite that simple. In trying to organize post-Katrina, these groups found themselves in some situations they'd never faced before.

### **Taking Action**

The organizers in Houston saw at least partial action on their goals within a week of the storm. Local officials did a decent job in setting up a voucher system for getting survivors into apartments, but the city's process for finding and contracting with each building owner and listing units was painfully slow, says Wizing-Barrios. The Survivors Leadership Group successfully pushed for a change that allowed survivors to locate apartments themselves and then apply to have them covered by the voucher program.

Sometimes the group had to retreat to more immediate issues, such as when Hurricane Rita was approaching and officials wanted to give everyone still in the shelters a one-way ticket to Arkansas. Arguing that further displacement was unnecessary, TMO and the survivors group worked together at the last minute to get 500 people into apartments and hire buses to get them there.

A month later in Louisiana, PICO, another organizing network, presented its own list of demands to the governor and other officials. Their "Covenant to Rebuild Louisiana" outlines five major rights on which any future rebuilding should be based: The right to self-sufficiency, guaranteeing to displaced families the jobs and other economic benefits of recovery, along with access to services; the right to return, including a right to temporary housing in or near their neighborhoods while their homes are rebuilt; the right to participate in decisions about rebuilding; the right of communities like Houston with large numbers of evacuees to long-term federal aid; and the right to "Hometown Security," including adequate hurricane protection. On October 5, in front of 75 ministers and 1,000 others from PICO member congregations, Governor Kathleen Blanco signed the covenant.

Since then, like IAF, PICO has been building on its covenant by working simultaneously on small and large issues. In December one of their member groups, Working Interfaith Network, met with sheriffs to work out a plan for a community policing strategy in a North Baton Rouge trailer park that is housing evacuees. All Congregations Together (ACT) of New Orleans and Louisiana Interfaiths Together (LIFT), PICO's statewide group, are currently organizing public meetings to build participation in the city's planning process for rebuilding New Orleans.

Housing has been a major issue for all of the networks. In November ACORN, People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition, UNITE HERE, SEIU and individual New Orleans renters won a lawsuit against landlords who were posting eviction notices on the doors of evacuees' homes without attempting to contact them at their new locations. The agreement required FEMA to turn over contact information for the evacuees so they could be reached and provided that eviction hearings are scheduled no sooner than 45 days after the notices are mailed. ACORN and other groups also won extensions in the deadlines by which FEMA was to end assistance to survivors staying in

hotels, and have taken on mortgage companies that were either charging prepayment penalties or rushing into foreclosure actions.

Families from New Orleans have been fighting both FEMA and NIMBYism from city council members and better-off residents for the right to set up FEMA's temporary trailers near their damaged homes. "If it's okay to live in a trailer far away, and my car is washed away, and I can't commute, why can't I live in the city?" asks Tanya Harris, ACORN's lead organizer in New Orleans. The Jeremiah Group, the New Orleans IAF chapter, has taken on the trailer situation, first meeting with council people and local groups to separate legitimate infrastructure concerns from the NIMBYism, as lead organizer Jackie Jones puts it, and then turning constituents out to meetings to speak in favor of allowing temporary housing.

### **Organizing a Diaspora**

It's in the nature of many place-based, grassroots organizations to work with individuals or institutions. ACORN, for example, is an individual membership organization, organizing networks of local chapters of low-to-moderate income people to fight for better treatment for themselves and their neighborhoods. IAF and PICO, on the other hand, have institutions, almost always congregations, as members. The networks' organizers seek out leaders within those institutions, train them in various organizing methods and let them organize under the banner of their congregations.

In communities that received large numbers of evacuees, local chapters of IAF and PICO found themselves wanting to organize large groups of people who had been torn loose from their institutions. And yet there was no time to do all the usual training and relationship-building before taking action.

ACORN, whose membership was heavily concentrated in some of the hardest-hit neighborhoods of New Orleans and had its national headquarters there, found itself trying to organize "a neighborhood chapter where people are thousands of miles apart," says Steve Kest, ACORN's executive director.

The major organizing networks adapted in similar but subtly different ways. In Houston, TMO shut down its offices for a while and directed all its organizing energy to the Astrodome and other shelters. In the shelters, they basically flipped their usual order of business; rather than seeking out institutions in which they might find leaders, organizers sought out people who had been community leaders in New Orleans – pastors, PTA leaders, neighborhood association members – and then tried to find or make institutional structures for them to fit into.

IAF groups have not focused on hooking survivors into existing member congregations, because their issues – both short- and long-term – are so different. Although few are able to at this time, most survivors want to return home. This creates the challenge of organizing people where they are now, though the organizing is about a place they care for somewhere else, says Dave Beckwith, executive director of the Needmor Fund, which has been active in recent years in Louisiana.

IAF's groups in northern Louisiana and some Texas cities are even more explicit about this distinction, calling their local survivor groups "Jeremiah Chapters in Exile," after their New Orleans chapter, The Jeremiah Group. Whether or not they were involved with Jeremiah before, the expectation is that evacuees who have gotten organized in their host cities will stay active when they return to New Orleans, bringing with them the skills, training and relationships they've built during their "exile."

ACORN is even more explicit about this focus toward home. Acting as a "family," it has focused more on finding all of its existing members and keeping them in the loop and active, rather than organizing entire evacuee communities, though in the New Orleans area its work is definitely attracting many new members. ACORN used its national network of offices to find dispersed members all over the country and has united them all in the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association. One strategy was to contact members using text messaging on cell phones.

PICO's six Louisiana organizations, which form the regional group Louisiana Interfaiths Together, focused more on organizing evacuees who had been housed in small congregations or with congregation members than those in the large shelters. These small congregations were putting themselves out on a limb, housing, feeding and caring for hundreds more people than they usually would. As a result, the interests of the evacuees and the already-organized congregations were quite closely aligned, at least temporarily, says Gordon Whitman, who oversees PICO's communications and research. "From an organizing standpoint, it was possible to create a common platform" around FEMA's responses and whether people were able to go back, he notes.

Organizing groups in host cities are trying not to view the different needs of evacuees and locals as a competition, seeking instead to pick organizing goals that will benefit both. IAF's group in Shreveport, LA, for example, is currently pushing for 24-hour bus service. This came up because evacuees were having trouble getting to jobs, or appointments for housing or other assistance, but the service would help all working people in the area. The IAF group is also working on a plan to renovate abandoned HUD housing for evacuees, pitching it to existing residents as a way to revitalize their neighborhoods.

### **The Rush to Take Action**

The scale of the need has also been a challenge for organizers. "It was different from typical organizing, because there were actions to be done all the time, every day," recalls TMO's Wizig-Barrios. Her group was used to doing slow and precise policy-oriented campaigns based on extensive relationship-building and accountability sessions. By comparison, when FEMA had all the survivors in Houston lined up in 100-degree heat outside an air-conditioned stadium to get their debit cards, the issue was much more immediate. People were already fainting in the line, which ended up being about seven hours long, when TMO called on the county judge to use his influence to get FEMA to allow people to wait inside.

They prevailed in this and many other cases, but with such a barrage of action and a rapid growth in new members, says Wizing-Barrios, they've had to be careful to step back and find some way to actually do the leadership training that they usually rely upon.

Time pressure also called for some exceptions to one of IAF's most cherished principles, the Iron Rule: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." Or not really exceptions, but a recognition that this was a rare time when some things needed to be done that those affected couldn't do for themselves. "Usually we work through institutions and we develop a constituency who have power and standing because of who they represent," explains Wizing-Barrios. "Clearly the evacuees didn't have any power and standing in Houston. So we used the power and standing of TMO. This meant me as the organizer would play much more of a central role than I usually would. Speaking for them, which I don't usually do. But in this situation they would not have had access."

But this was temporary. "We took every opportunity we could to put the evacuee leadership out front," she says. "Politicians [and] media now recognize the survivor leadership and they speak for themselves."

Aside from a slower time frame, all of these groups are also used to focusing on wins that can be built upon, solid policy changes or programs that provide stepping stones to bigger and better things. Grassroots organizing networks can be distinguished from more temporary activist coalitions because they are often fighting for something, not just against something.

In the aftermath of Katrina, organizers did move fairly quickly from the necessary direct service relief work into organizing. Yet they are still having to balance their long-term organizing goal – making sure the poor and displaced have a real voice in the rebuilding of devastated areas – with a recurrent surge of needed actions whose wins are temporary and directed at basic needs. "Any victories are temporary in this fight," says ACORN's Kest.

### **Experience Pays Off**

It's common for activists and organizers to say the silver lining in disasters is the opportunity to get more people aware of and involved in fixing structural problems. Katrina was no exception. But more immediate good news is that the catastrophe showcased just how strong organizing networks already were on the Gulf Coast, and that the relationships they had been building for so long could bring the networks new recognition and support.

In Houston, Mayor Bill White immediately invited TMO into the inner circle of people he gathered to coordinate evacuee hosting. He recognized from his past interactions with the group how valuable they would be; they were the only people actually asking the evacuees what they needed.

"We were supposed to meet with [Louisiana Senator David Vitter] on the day [that Katrina hit]," remembers Perry Perkins, an organizer with Northern and Central

Louisiana Interfaith. “His office called on Sunday and said, ‘Obviously we’re not going to meet, but what are your ideas about recovery? This looks bad.’ We said immediately, People are going to need public works jobs in [areas hit by the storm] and in cities people have evacuated to. Vitter’s people went to the Department of Labor, and the first [relief] package had \$62 million for public works jobs in impacted communities in Louisiana.”

Before the hurricane, PICO had been spending the previous couple of years trying to expand its usual local and regional strength to a national level. They had hired extra staff, conducted new trainings, and begun to build relationships in Washington. So the timing of Katrina “has been very interesting to us,” says Whitman. “It made the point that there are issues that are life and death that depend on what Washington does. And it showed us that the skills and relationships we were building were very important.”

### **Cooperation or Coexistence?**

Katrina was the sort of event that funders see as a great opportunity to promote collaboration among their grantees. But in the fractured atmosphere in which much of the work was going on, the model has been more like ships passing in the night, albeit ships headed in roughly the same direction.

Whether it’s because previous turf battles or circumstances have given them constituencies that don’t overlap much, or because they have been stretched so thin, many organizers with the major networks feel like they’ve been doing this work alone. “It’s almost sad that nobody else is doing it...nobody else is coming forward,” says Tanya Harris, ACORN’s lead organizer in New Orleans.

“We just haven’t seen the presence of [other organizers],” echoes the IAF’s Stephens. “I know they might be doing some things... we’re just not rubbing shoulders with that.” To some extent, Stephens’ perception in Houston may reflect an unusual level of acceptance of TMO by the powers that be, giving them more direct access. “ACORN might be at meetings, protesting on the outside,” she acknowledges.

Stephens is one of the few organizers willing to directly question the presumption that there should be more coordination. “I got myself in all sorts of trouble [at a Neighborhood Funders Group meeting] when I said I don’t think it’s a bad thing if we all have a congressional strategy,” she says. “Hopefully they’ll be hearing the same things from [many] people. I’m different from some foundation people – I don’t think it’s bad to have a lot of voices out there, as long as they’re all from people organizing people who are experiencing what is happening.”

While those on the ground may have been feeling isolated, there have in fact been little bits of interaction, at least in Louisiana. If groups bump into each other lobbying or at meetings, “Generally we talk briefly and coordinate what we’re saying,” says Perkins. “We have different constituencies, so it doesn’t make sense to totally work together, but also it doesn’t make sense to ask for dramatically different stuff.”

PICO and ACORN have had a few meetings together in Louisiana, say Whitman and Kest. “We’ve been coordinating with ACORN, sharing a lot of information, comparing our agendas; they’re very consistent,” says Whitman. “We’ve not been doing any direct joint organizing,” but he adds that that’s under consideration.

The smaller activist or local organizing groups, especially those still on the ground in New Orleans and the surrounding areas, offer a different story. Shana Sassoon of the New Orleans Network, a group born out of the League of Pissed Off Voters that has been focusing on helping people rebuild institutional and social connections, and Janet Perkins, program director of the Southern Partners Fund, have both seen dramatically more spirit of cooperation on the ground among smaller activist, organizing and social groups.

Sassoon has gotten a bigger picture as she attends other groups’ meetings, compiling an online database to answer the frequent questions about who’s working on each issue. “New Orleans is a city of deep historical divisions – race, class, political,” she says. “One of the most amazing things that has happened [is] people who wouldn’t have sat down in a room together [before], are willing to do so. There’s definitely a lot more coordination.”

### **New Faces, New Energy**

Katrina-specific organizing, particularly around the issues of right of return and community participation in reconstruction planning, is going to be needed for the coming decade at least. Given what they’ve experienced so far, organizers expect these efforts to be much more diverse, demographically and geographically, than their work in the region ever was before. They also expect it to be more coordinated on state, regional and national levels.

The ability of organizing networks to swing into action, disseminate information when it was scarce, and provide a clear strategy in a chaotic world has attracted some new institutional and individual members, allowing the networks to expand into new areas and demographics.

For example, along with the evacuee groups, two new local African-American congregations, a constituency TMO had been hoping to have better represented in its membership, are joining the group entirely because they saw “what we had done [post-Katrina],” says Wizig-Barrios. “We’re finding pastors and congregations we didn’t have a relationship with before,” agrees Perry Perkins. “It’s changing the face of our organization.” He says they are reaching beyond their narrow borders in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish. ACORN, meanwhile, has found filling buses for the 24-hour drive to Washington, DC to lobby to be far easier than usual – their visible presence in the nearly empty Ninth Ward has generated a lot of interest from people who have felt abandoned.

Katrina has also brought some new issues and ways of thinking to the fore. While IAF’s Louisiana groups had generally been sympathetic to environmental groups’ interest in preventing wetlands loss and rebuilding coastal ecosystems, the connection of that work

to its members' immediate lives has become much more apparent and it may well move up the priority ladder.

Even more striking has been how people have spoken out on behalf of a strong public sector. "We went through a devastating freeze in the Rio Grande Valley in the early '80s," recalls Stephens. "FEMA was involved, and they were a competent agency. To see how incompetent they are now compared to what they were has really given us some insight into that a lot of government agencies have been made incompetent. We want to do some widespread education about the need for a public sector, and the kinds of things our organizations need to be involved in to make sure we have an effective public sector that gets paid for."

While the organizing networks may emerge successfully from the crises that arose after Katrina, they will find themselves to be quite different organizations than before. If the preliminary reactions of public officials and the media are an accurate measure, they may operate with new respect and perhaps greater access to resources. What they make of those opportunities could shape the Gulf Coast for decades to come.

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## **The Organizers Active on the Gulf Coast**

ACORN, (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) founded in 1970, has over 175,000 member families. They are organized in 850 neighborhood chapters in 75 cities, in four countries. ACORN has run campaigns on housing, schools, neighborhood safety, health care, job conditions and more. Members participate in local meetings and actively work on campaigns, elect leadership from the neighborhood level up and pay the organization's core expenses through membership dues and grassroots fundraisers.

[www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org)

The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) has 56 affiliate organizations in 21 states and four countries. While its modern incarnation dates to the 1970s, IAF traces its roots to the activism of Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the 1940s. The organization's affiliates are made up of religious congregations of various denominations. Recent campaigns of note include the living wage movement, Nehemiah owner-occupied housing in four cities in the Northeastern United States, community schools and blight removal in struggling urban neighborhoods.

[www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org)

Like IAF, PICO's members are congregations, with over 1,000 member institutions in 150 cities in 17 states. PICO was founded in 1972 to help support neighborhood groups in California. Its model is that congregations serve as the institutional base for community organizations. It has been especially active in recent years on the issues of health care, housing, neighborhood safety, civic participation and high-quality public schools and after-school programs.

[www.piconetwork.org](http://www.piconetwork.org)

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF) is a project of Community Labor United, founded in New Orleans in 1998. The CLU is composed of African-American grassroots community groups and multi-ethnic allies. The PHRF was formed in the week after Hurricane Katrina to plan a people's response to the crisis. It has held demonstrations in New Orleans and in cities to which many residents were displaced, with the central goal of ensuring residents' right of return.

[www.communitylaborunited.net](http://www.communitylaborunited.net)

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## Resources

The Metropolitan Organization

[www.tmohouston.net](http://www.tmohouston.net)

The Jeremiah Group

[jeremiahgroupNO@yahoo.com](mailto:jeremiahgroupNO@yahoo.com)

PICO Louisiana Interfaiths Together

[www.piconetwork.org/index-1.html](http://www.piconetwork.org/index-1.html)

ACORN Katrina Relief

[www.acorn.org/index.php?id=9704](http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=9704)

New Orleans Network

[www.neworleansnetwork.org](http://www.neworleansnetwork.org)

People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

[www.communitylaborunited.net](http://www.communitylaborunited.net)