LIFE AFTER

KATRINA

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH NONPROFIT COLLABORATION ON THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST
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THE STRENGTH OF MANY

A week or so into the post-Katrina era, amid the ruins of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Reilly Morse, who would soon join the Mississippi Center for Justice legal aid team, met with a small group of knowledgeable locals to discuss how to ensure that the rebuilding of the region would be equitable and fair.

Already, there were reasons for concern, not the least of which was the coast’s history of discrimination.

At that point, the old world had disappeared, and groups such as Morse’s, along with nonprofits with which they would soon be collaborating, including Hope Enterprise Corporation (then known as the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta) and the Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP, were trying to determine what would – and should – take its place. Toward that end, Morse sought the advice of people with relevant firsthand knowledge, including tour boat operator Louis Skrmetta, Mississippi Sierra Club representative Becky Gillette, history professor Derrick Evans and city planner Jeffrey Bounds.
The meeting took place around Morse’s dining room table and lasted several hours, until the 10 pm nightly curfew sent everyone off to whatever place they called home at that point. Everyone in the group knew each other, but they were reconnecting in a dramatic new environment, Morse said. All were concerned about the potential for government leaders to use the disaster as an excuse to ignore or weaken public accountability and environmental regulations and to direct aid away from those in the greatest need. They also saw an opportunity to galvanize the region’s activist groups into a broader coalition.

“Everyone who was there ended up rising in some way to a leadership role, either out front or behind the scenes,” Morse recalled. “Each of us had a different discipline or profession, so we represented a cross-section of ideas and perspectives about the Coast. And even then, our sense of the direction the recovery would take was pretty accurate. I expected Katrina would reopen the conversation about race and economics – that those without a voice, primarily poor and minority, would not get the same treatment during the recovery.” Unfortunately, he added, those concerns proved well-founded.

As the rebuilding process was taking shape, HOPE’s CEO, Bill Bynum, was meeting with former Netscape CEO and philanthropist Jim Barksdale to discuss ways to provide housing for lower- and moderate-income storm victims, many of whom were being overlooked by the state’s federally-funded housing recovery program. “Affordable housing wasn’t on anybody’s radar,” Bynum recalled. Barksdale, who then chaired Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour’s Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal, recognized the need and agreed to help, Bynum said, and together they embarked upon what came to be known as the Home Again program, which provided affordable housing for storm victims who had few other options.
“THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGY WAS TO SPEAK WITH A UNIFIED VOICE. SO THAT’S WHAT WE DID.”

BILL BYNUM
Meanwhile, Derrick Johnson, president of the state chapter of the NAACP and then vice chair of the governor’s recovery commission, was trying to steer the state’s rebuilding programs in a more equitable direction. Specifically, it concerned Johnson that Barbour had been granted exemptions from federal guidelines requiring that the majority of housing disaster funds go to those who had been financially distressed even before the storm. As Johnson told a congressional subcommittee looking into the rebuilding program, “It is outrageous that the poorest state in the country would request and receive waivers not to assist the most vulnerable citizens impacted by Hurricane Katrina.”

As the three nonprofits advocated for underserved storm victims, Morse, Bynum and Johnson reached a simultaneous conclusion that would not only help ensure a more equitable recovery, but also set the stage for expanding their missions to address a multitude of needs that the hurricane had brought to the fore. Their conclusion: They needed to collaborate. “We realized that a lot of voices were required to ensure that all the needs were addressed,” Bynum said. “The most effective strategy was to speak with a unified voice. So that’s what we did.”

Johnson agreed. “The NAACP had good contacts in communities that were hit hard by the storm, but we had no access to financial relief programs – like HOPE did, or to legal services – like the Center for Justice did,” he said. “After Katrina, it was very obvious who was truly action-oriented. We all recognized that the strength of our organizations lay in the fact that we lead with outcome, not institutional ego. Outcome is more important than taking credit. Katrina highlighted new and old inequities, and it showed us how collaboration could help effectively address them. Katrina was the foundation.”
Over the course of the recovery, the organizations made decisions at multiple junctures to leverage one another’s collective strengths to make the advocacy effort more effective than any one organization could achieve on its own. Specifically, HOPE brought to the collaboration its national banking and community development expertise, as well as an effective in-house policy analysis capability (the Mississippi Economic Policy Center) to weigh in on demographics, housing priorities, best practices and financial education needs of those recovering from disaster. On the construction side, HOPE brought a solid track record of carrying out projects, accessing sophisticated forms of capital, like New Markets Tax Credits, and critical thinking on the housing projects proposed by the Mississippi Development Authority and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. HOPE also had strong connections with senior policy and foundation officials.

The NAACP brought national political and media access, as well as credibility on issues of racial discrimination with congressional leaders and, after the Obama election, with administration officials. The NAACP also had a powerful network among elected officials in Mississippi and with grassroots organizations through its branch memberships, and having the NAACP headline events increased public engagement.

The Mississippi Center for Justice hired staff to open an office in Biloxi and helped to coordinate free legal clinics with the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, starting in the fall of 2005. As MCJ grew, the organization attracted civil legal aid volunteer assistance from the Student Hurricane Network, from law schools, and from national law firms and enabling it to provide individual direct support to thousands of households seeking help with claims against FEMA, their insurers, the Mississippi Development Authority for home grants, and with evictions, improper closing of FEMA trailer sites and public housing, contractor fraud and condemnation of homes.
Early in the recovery period, Morse and fellow MCJ attorney John Jopling recognized the need to influence state and federal policy debate over restoring safe and affordable housing on the coast. With experienced affordable housing practitioners on staff, HOPE also saw the need to engage policy makers to ensure that housing needs were not overlooked and that the recommendations were practical for low-income residents.

Unfortunately, early drafts of the commission’s rebuilding plan omitted affordable housing as an area of emphasis. Johnson, in his capacity as co-chair of the commission provided the partners with valuable intelligence about how the process was unfolding. HOPE responded to the information by shadow authoring an affordable housing section of the report and lobbying other influential members of the commission to expand the scope of the report.

Following the release of the report, however, the state moved with frustratingly slow and limited assistance for the Coast’s low-income residents.
The initial housing recovery program, Phase I, excluded renters and uninsured homeowners by providing grants of up to $150,000 only to homeowners with property insurance who had experienced flood damage from the storm surge. Led by groups that soon would form the Steps Coalition (a collection of nonprofit organizations that came together after the storm to advocate for the equitable rebuilding of the Mississippi Gulf Coast), representatives of 24 civic groups, nonprofits and church organizations lodged a protest.

As part of the protest effort, the Mississippi Center for Justice gathered and submitted 2000 signatures opposing the preliminary Phase I policy proposals. In its post-Katrina report, MCJ concluded that such an exclusion harmed lower-income and minority households, who were more likely to be uninsured. “The disparity in recovery reinforces a vicious cycle of asset impoverishment for minority and low-income residents, particularly those with inherited ties to historically segregated and disaster-prone locations,” the report noted.

The groups successfully pressured Governor Barbour to provide homeowner assistance grants to lower-income storm victims. Once again, however, the state threw up roadblocks for the Coast’s most distressed residents. The plan for homeowners without insurance capped awards at $50,000.

HOPE, MCJ and the MS NAACP launched a coordinated response. The Mississippi Economic Policy Center, managed by HOPE, used data to illustrate both the gaps in the proposed program and the types of families that would be left out as a result of the policy decision. HOPE worked behind the scenes to influence the governor with the information. Meanwhile, MCJ and the MS NAACP exerted external
pressure on the governor through the strategic engagement of sympathetic members of Congress and the media. Both MCJ and MS NAACP used the data to inform invited congressional testimony during hearings held in Washington and on the Gulf Coast.

The collective efforts paid off when the state announced that it would raise the damage awards for uninsured residents from $50,000 to $100,000. This change marked a huge victory for uninsured homeowners and demonstrated the power that could be leveraged by the organizations when working together.

The successful advocacy effort also served as the foundation for future collaboration on pivotal recovery issues and provided a roadmap for working together beyond the storm.

“IT’S EASY TO OVERLOOK THESE THINGS WHEN YOU’RE PRIVILEGED.”

GERALD BLESSEY
One of the most visible joint efforts was a lawsuit filed by MCJ representing the MS NAACP against HUD over Governor Barbour’s attempted diversion of $600 million in housing aid to a port expansion. The result was a settlement in which what was known as the Neighborhood Home Program assisted more than 5,000 households across nine counties, with high concentrations of housing repair and reconstruction occurring in African-American neighborhoods in Gulfport, Biloxi, Moss Point, Pascagoula, Hattiesburg and Laurel.

The role of the nonprofits in the decade-long recovery program was crucial, said former Biloxi mayor Gerald Blessey, whom Governor Barbour appointed post-Katrina “housing czar.” Though Blessey said he saw no evidence of “an intentional policy to exclude” lower- and moderate-income storm victims from recovery programs, he acknowledged that the nonprofits played a key role in ensuring an equitable recovery. “With catastrophes, there are so many variables, and so many unknowns, and policymakers tend to pay attention to the biggest problems – those that are most evident,” Blessey said. The nonprofits, he said, brought problems to the forefront that the government had been slow to recognize. “They were persistent to the point that they were included.”

Part of the problem on the post-Katrina Mississippi coast was the same that New Orleans experienced, in which many government officials with the power to assist were culturally and geographically isolated from those in greatest need. “It’s easy to overlook these things when you’re privileged,” Blessey said. “You need someone to make sure that you know, and that’s what the nonprofits did.”
EXPANDED CAPACITY

Ongoing collaborations grew from the nonprofits’ post-Katrina successes, during which all three saw their missions significantly expand, Bynum said. Because the hurricane struck near the end of the month, just before payday, people who were living on tight budgets were particularly stressed, he noted. Early on, HOPE attempted to fill the gap for low- and moderate-income homeowners and renters through direct aid, counseling, advocacy work and low-interest loans. The organization also issued ATM cards to cash-strapped storm victims to funnel insurance settlements and disaster aid and developed an emergency loan program through its existing credit union. HOPE collaborated with MCJ and the NAACP to identify those in need and organize its response.

HOPE also worked with Baltimore-based Enterprise Community Partners and Atlanta-based NeighborWorks to create a new nonprofit, Home Again, to construct affordable modular houses; partnered with Freddie Mac to provide consumer and mortgage loans through a mobile office, the HomeHelp Express Bus; joined the organization
Accion USA to develop a Back to Business loan program for small businesses; and collaborated with the Jackson-based Foundation for the Mid South and New Orleans-based Entergy Corporation to launch a program called Power of HOPE to provide individual housing grants. Altogether, HOPE made approximately $10 million in consumer, business and mortgage loans after the storm.

During the early stages of the recovery, Bynum also hosted federal officials, including representatives from the U.S. Treasury, to make the case for legislation enabling an extra allocation of the New Markets Tax Credit for investments in low-income communities, which Congress ultimately passed. And at Barksdale’s request, HOPE developed an affordable housing recovery plan because none had been included in the draft recommendations of the governor’s recovery commission. Subsequently, HOPE administered the financial counseling component of the state’s disaster aid program for uninsured homeowners, which the three nonprofits had successfully advocated for.

“...RESOURCES, INTELLIGENCE AND OPEN HEARTS.”

MARTHA MURPHY
Barksdale, who contributed $2.6 million to HOPE’s Home Again affordable housing project, said of the nonprofit’s initial pitch, “The more I listened, the more they seemed legit. They came on a general mission and I made it more specific….I was impressed with HOPE’s professionalism and their seeming ability to handle the mechanics.” Like MCJ and the NAACP, HOPE tapped an expanding network of organizations, foundations and individuals who recognized the needs on the Coast. Also contributing to Home Again were the Home Depot Foundation, author John Grisham and his wife Renee, and business owner Martha Murphy, who lost her family home in Hancock County and established an impromptu relief center in the nearby community of DeLisle long before government relief efforts were underway. “HOPE showed up quickly and treated us like valuable people,” said Murphy, who had previously not heard of the organization but now sits on its board. “They came with resources, intelligence and open hearts. HOPE came to rebuild.” The nonprofits, she said, “were quick, nimble, and they had longevity. They had staying power, and they helped us gain stability. Some got here quick, some got here later but accomplished a lot. They played different roles.”

The Mississippi Center of Justice, which, like HOPE, opened an office in Biloxi soon after the storm, provided free legal services to Gulf Coast residents, who frequently had problems with lost documentation or unclear property titles and who had to endure what Morse described as stressful, repeated “financial strip searches” when applying for disaster aid. The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law engaged the organization to hold outreach workshops for out-of-state lawyers who were working pro bono to counsel low- and moderate-income storm victims. MCJ also collected block-by-block housing data, which would later be used to inform public policy debate over the allocation of disaster relief funds.
Among its other legal services after the storm, MCJ assisted the nonprofit Boat People SOS in providing translation services for Vietnamese-American storm victims. “English proficiency was the biggest barrier after Katrina,” said Daniel Le, the director of the Biloxi office of Boat People SOS. Such storm victims, he said, “were marginalized and underserved. They’d have never gotten the services they were entitled to.”

The NAACP created an entirely new nonprofit, the Community Policy, Research and Training Institute, commonly known as One Voice, to address in a more cohesive way the issues facing Mississippi’s underserved storm victims. One Voice was later expanded to help Louisiana residents as well. Part of One Voice’s mission was similar to the Steps Coalition’s— to promote the nonprofits’ common agendas and help them speak in a unified voice. Under Johnson’s guidance, One Voice sought to address broader needs, such as healthcare for the uninsured, that had existed before the storm but were exacerbated in its aftermath.
“IT’S ABOUT FINDING NEW, MORE EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO ADDRESS PROBLEMS... WORSENED BY THE STORM.

REILLY MORSE”
The success of the collaboration during the recovery highlighted the utility of addressing big problems in new ways. “We’ve found the same kind of collaboration makes sense for issues that aren’t directly related to the storm, like predatory lending, education and immigration reform,” Bynum said. Working together, the three organizations can approach big, long-term issues on multiple fronts.

Morse added, “Today, we’re moving forward, using what we learned from our experiences collaborating after Katrina. It’s about finding new, more effective approaches to address problems that were highlighted, and in many cases worsened, by the storm — using all the tools at your disposal, including advocacy, litigation, negotiation, and innovative financing, to achieve quantifiable results.”

In Morse’s view, “The biggest success was that the storm gave birth to a progressive coalition experience tied to national groups that changed the discussion about race.” The same experience can be applied to any of the issues facing Mississippi, he said.
For nonprofits and advocacy groups that participated in the recovery, the Steps Coalition in particular enabled greater focus on common goals and helped attract national attention to local inequities in the recovery process, he said.

Among the issues that the three nonprofits are now collaborating to address are:

- Predatory lending, a major potential threat immediately after the storm that persists today. HOPE, MCJ and the NAACP have worked especially closely on this issue, undertaking policy analysis and advocating for small-dollar loan reforms. In addition, HOPE and MCJ work together and independently to engage employers and mainstream financial institutions in providing alternatives to payday loan products. MCJ carries out this work through its New Roots Credit Partnership, while it is a central activity of Hope Credit Union.

- Substandard public education is a perennial problem made worse by the state’s inadequate school funding. All three organizations jointly advocated for the ballot measure known as Initiative 42, which required full funding of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP). The NAACP was a prime mover on the Initiative 42 campaign, and MCJ provided training sessions for signature gatherers and local points of drop-off in its Indianola and Biloxi offices. The Hope Policy Institute conducted and disseminated policy analysis on the mechanics of school funding and the benefits of Initiative 42. While Initiative 42 did not pass, the three organizations are working together to leverage the campaign’s infrastructure for future social change efforts.

- Medicaid expansion and state healthcare exchange. The three organizations have worked together to press for Medicaid
expansion and the establishment of a state-run health exchange. In 2013, with the support and strategic engagement of the three organizations, legislative debate over the issue was forced into a special session, during which an expansion amendment was voted down along party lines.

- Affordable housing through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. For several years, HOPE and MCJ have helped lead a statewide affordable housing campaign seeking passage of enabling legislation. After the statewide effort hit roadblocks, the coalition helped create the first housing trust fund in the state in the city of Jackson.

- Equitable employment and environmental justice – issues MCJ and the NAACP focused on during a controversial state effort to divert Katrina recovery funds to an economic development project to expand the state port in Gulfport. The groups, with support from the Lawyers’ Committee, helped the Steps Coalition launch the Port Campaign Coalition, while the Mississippi Development Authority and the State Port authority spent huge sums of money on the project while losing jobs and customers, pressured HUD to assume greater oversight over the expenditure of the funds, and with a key assist from HOPE CEO Bill Bynum, persuaded HUD Deputy Secretary Maurice Jones to visit the site and hear community concerns. Among the groups’ goals is to ensure that the Coast’s minority populations, which historically participated in port job opportunities through the longshoreman’s union, will see greater employment options as a result.

- High hurricane insurance rates on the Gulf Coast, post-Katrina, which are stifling redevelopment – a particular problem for lower-income residents.
“KATRINA FORCED EVERYTHING OUT IN THE OPEN. UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS GAINED A VOICE.”

DERRICK JOHNSON
Collaborations to address such persistent and pervasive issues often tap other organizations that share a stake in eliminating inequalities highlighted by the storm. As Johnson noted, during the post-Katrina recovery all three nonprofits expanded their resources and extended their reach by working with other nonprofits and foundations on the Coast and elsewhere. “What Katrina did was galvanize all these groups to eliminate inequity in a state that had a poor legacy in that regard,” Johnson said. “Katrina forced everything out into the open. Underserved populations gained a voice – and access – through the nonprofits. So we found ways to continue that collaboration.”
Coast residents often refer to Katrina as an equal-opportunity disaster, which impartially obliterated waterfront mansions, suburban ranch houses, shotgun shacks and mobile homes, and where affluent people faced the same immediate challenges as those whose basic well-being had been tenuous even before. The communal loss was in many ways inspiring, with everyone on equal footing and everyone helping everyone else. As Morse observed: “Everybody was reduced to the resource level of a legal services client. Everybody was stripped of everything. You had a bank branch manager in dirty, torn clothes and one tennis shoe waiting in the same line for ice as the garbage man. It forced egalitarianism on us all.” But, he said, the sense of parity soon began to fade, and inequities revealed during the first few months of the recovery became more pronounced over time. “By and large, the folks left out were folks who were on the wrong side of the tracks,” he said.

Whether by design or by default, inequities in the government’s response reflected a familiar disengagement from the needs of the
poor, and the process of finding ways to overcome that disengagement now informs the nonprofits’ individual and collaborative efforts, Morse said. “That’s what this is all about – using what we learned during that initial crisis to make things better for the long term,” he said.

In the coming years, the importance of issues facing lower-income and minority Mississippians will only increase, Bynum said. As he told the Jackson Free Press, “Half of all children in Mississippi are nonwhite, and if you look at indicators of socioeconomic well-being – whether it’s wealth, health or education – those communities and those children fare worse than the population overall, and that’s not sustainable. That’s the future workforce of Mississippi, and we’ve got to do better to make sure everyone is equipped to succeed and to contribute to the economy.”
CONTACT US

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Mississippi Chapter of the NAACP
www.uniteonevoice.org/ovms | http://naacpms.org