

Taking Care of Texans New and Old

Nearly one year ago, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast, wreaking havoc while exposing the vast poverty that pervades our nation. It lent a human face to a story of widespread economic hardship that is usually told by numbers and data, not images of human suffering.

Hundreds of thousands of our Louisiana neighbors fled to Texas for dry land and a chance at a better life. According to a recent statewide survey, about 250,000 of these evacuees still live in Texas.

Texas commissioned the survey to urge the federal government to provide the state with continued funding to meet the health care, housing, employment, and education needs of these new residents.

The evacuees certainly need our statewide attention. Most are low income. Before the hurricane, 61% of evacuee households earned less than \$20,000 a year. Today, these low wages persist—41% earn less than \$500 a month.

A majority of “Katrina Texans” have not found work at all. Nearly 60% are unemployed. This population is accustomed to working. Before the hurricane, only 6% of evacuees were out of work.

Long-term housing is a major concern for Katrina evacuees. Nearly 135,000 evacuees, including 55,000 children, live in homes that receive FEMA housing subsidies that are set to expire within the next few months.

Health care is another large issue. Before Katrina, 37% of workers had employer-based health coverage. That number has dropped by 18%. Access to Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, which provide health insurance to low-income people, has also declined (Medicaid has dropped 8% and CHIP has dropped 12%). Forty-one percent of adults and 30% of children are uninsured.

Texas, under the leadership of state and local officials, advocates, and everyday citizens, has done a tremendous job welcoming the evacuees and helping them get settled.

That effort is appreciated. According to the survey, 84% of evacuees classified Texas’ response to the hurricane as “excellent,” “very good,” or “good.” Only 5% ranked it as poor.

Texas should continue to solicit ongoing federal assistance to ensure that Katrina evacuees receive the services they need to start over in Texas.

As we work together as a state to determine the best way to serve the quarter of a million Katrina evacuees who now call Texas home, however, we must not forget the millions of poor Texans who are natives of this state.

More than 3.5 million Texans (16.5% of Texas’ population) live in poverty, earning \$16,090 or less for a family of three. Over 8.4 million Texans (nearly 38% of Texas’

population) are classified as the working-poor, earning \$33,200 or less for a family of three. These Texans need just as much attention as the Katrina evacuees.

Although Texas ranks at the bottom of the country on what it spends on social services, the governor has asked state agencies to propose how to cut their budgets 10 percent. If the state follows through with these cuts, fewer low-income children, disabled adults, and the elderly will receive essential health and human services.

Texas' leadership must rally around all of its vulnerable citizens—new and old—and truly make the state a place where all hard working people can get a shot at a better life.

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