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Hurricane Response Must Address Women's Needs

WASHINGTON, DC – In the wake of Hurricane Katrina the people of the United States have rallied to provide emergency food, water, clothing and shelter to the hundreds of thousands of survivors displaced by the storm. In his address on September 15, President Bush suggested that it will soon be time to move from the work of relief to the work of recovery and rebuilding. **While the President's proposals to support rebuilding efforts are significant, it is also crucial that we consider the unique, long-term needs of women and families affected by this tragedy.**

The President's recovery plan includes the creation of worker recovery accounts to help individual Katrina survivors obtain job training and education. This is an essential step toward rebuilding communities in the Gulf Coast region, but in order to address the substantial barriers to employment faced by women, funding must also be allocated to existing programs that have proven their ability to address the unique needs of women.

As the nation transitions from emergency relief to long-term recovery efforts, we must remember that for many women and children affected by the hurricane, poverty, uncertainty and devastation are not new. Before Hurricane Katrina many children along the Gulf Coast were perpetually hungry, many women lacked the education or training needed to secure well-paying employment, and many families lived paycheck to paycheck.

Around the world women and children are more likely to be poor or near poor than any other group. In the United States, women earn only 76 cents for every dollar earned by men. Women are also more likely to be employed in low-paying service jobs, which offer few benefits or opportunities for advancement. Prior to the Hurricane there were nearly 900,000 single mothers living in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. On average two in five of these single mothers lived in poverty. For poor and working poor women, any unforeseen event, such as a car in need of repairs, the loss of a job, injury, divorce or death of a family member, can result in the inability to make rent, pay the heating bill, or put food on the table.

Those with few resources are hit hardest by natural disasters, and Katrina was no exception. We have learned that those left behind during the pre-hurricane evacuation were disproportionately poor, older people and people of color. In the coming months, as we come to see the true extent of Katrina's devastation, women and children will doubtlessly face some of the gravest challenges to putting their lives back together.

In the chaos that followed the hurricane, unknown numbers of women were raped and sexual assault survivors were driven from their homes and shelters. Many women who were struggling to get by before the storm have literally nothing left; their jobs, homes, cars, clothes and possibly family members have been swept away by the flood waters. Recovery will be a slow process, but if displaced women are to put their lives and the lives of their children back together, the reconstruction effort must address the root causes of women's economic insecurity.

For the last half century, women's education, training and career placement programs have played a pivotal role in helping women attain economic self-sufficiency. Women's shelters, domestic violence and sexual assault services also help women escape and recover from life-threatening violations of personal safety and security. Many programs and services have been physically destroyed by Katrina. The resources of other programs will be depleted as Katrina survivors begin making new homes across the country.

Individuals can support women's long-term recovery by giving to organizations such as the Women's Funding Network (www.wfnet.org) and The Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault (<http://louisianaraperelief.org>), which will support recovery efforts focused on the unique needs of women. However, if we are to truly aid women and their families in their recovery from this disaster, the **President must allocate a portion of his relief funding toward the existing programs and services that can truly help women gain long-term economic security.**

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Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that advocates for women's economic security through policies, programs and partnerships. Since 1978, the Network has assisted more than 10 million women to successfully enter, re-enter and advance in the workforce. Through supporting, advocating and advancing women's economic self-sufficiency, Women Work! members strengthen families and communities. For more information, visit www.womenwork.org or call (202) 467-6346.