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BILOXI CITY COUNCIL SET TO REMOVE FEMA TRAILERS, VICTIMIZING KATRINA SURVIVORS AND UNDERMINING OBAMA

*Residents, Advocates Urge Elected Officials to Stand Up for Human Rights, Vote Down
Proposed FEMA Trailer Removal Ordinance*

Biloxi, MS (June 12, 2009)---Despite President Barack Obama's decision to allow residents living in FEMA Trailers to remain in their trailers while the federal government partners with residents to find permanent housing[1], the Biloxi City Council is preparing to take action to kick these hurricane survivors out of their city. The Biloxi City Council will vote June 16th on an ordinance, backed by the City's community development office[2], forcing FEMA trailers to be removed from residential zones by August 9th. Housing and human rights advocates have denounced the proposed ordinance as another step in the victimization and marginalization of residents with disabilities, low income, elderly, immigrant, and minority survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita by their elected officials.

Chuck Rogers, a long-time Biloxi resident is currently living in a trailer on Redding Street as he works with Hope Community Development Agency, a community-based nonprofit working to find permanent homes for Katrina survivors, to redesign a new home for his lot. He is eager to move out of his trailer but now fears the city council ordinance will set back his plans to rebuild saying, "I'm just trying to do the best I can to build to the future."

"I think it's important that the city recognizes that everyone has not recovered completely from Katrina and that a number of people are still working on their homes," said Ward 2 Councilman Bill Stallworth, an outspoken critic of the ordinance who also serves as Executive Director of Hope Community Development Agency. "It will be unconscionable for the city to throw its citizens onto the streets."

"Biloxi will run afoul of the federal Fair Housing Act if the trailer occupants it displaces include high numbers of racial minorities, persons with disabilities, or single mothers with children," noted Reilly Morse, an attorney with the Mississippi Center for Justice.

The proposed move by the City Council comes in contrast to the Obama Administration's recent announcement to stall a planned eviction of families in FEMA trailer, instead deciding to sell a number of trailers for \$5 or less to residents, and provide \$50 million in housing vouchers and federal housing case management assistance to assist remaining qualified residents still in temporary housing to find their best options for permanent affordable housing. The plan, which came about after significant protest and outreach by advocates and residents[3], was viewed as an important first step on Gulf Coast recovery by the new Administration. Still questions remain about how the Administration plans to address the region's remaining inter-related post-Katrina-Rita social, economic and environmental crises, especially after the U.S. Treasury Department's recent decision to exclude Gulf Coast communities from key housing programs in the economic recovery package, affecting the construction of 10,000 much needed affordable housing units[4].

Advocates fear that such actions, if allowed to move forward, will not only be a major set-back for residents rebuilding their homes and lives in Biloxi, but possibly for residents in other cities

looking to enact similar ordinances to force out vulnerable residents still residing in FEMA Trailer but unable to find permanent affordable housing.

A group of advocates, including local groups Action Communication and Education Reform, Inc., Biloxi Branch NAACP, Dando la Mano, Hope CDA, Mississippi ACLU, Mississippi Center for Justice, Mississippi Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities, Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force, Mississippi LIFE, MPOWER, STEPS Coalition, and national allies including ACORN, Advancement Project, Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, Alabama Arise; and Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Louisiana Justice Institute, Oxfam America, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, National Low Income Housing Coalition, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, South Bay Communities Alliance and U.S. Human Rights Network, who helped push the Obama Administration to stop the planned FEMA Trailer evictions, are now urging the City of Biloxi, as well as state and federal leaders, to end the victimizing the survivors of our nation's largest disasters. Instead of removing residents from their land they are urging elected officials to enact policies which protect the human rights of hurricane survivors by looking to the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, a human rights policy that, for several years, has guided the U.S. government in providing temporary and permanent homes for people in foreign countries who become displaced by earthquakes, typhoons, and flooding and allowing survivors of disaster to participate in their recovery.

In order to ensure the human rights of hurricane survivors they are also urging:

- U.S. Treasury Department to reverse its decision and allow Gulf Opportunity Zone financing to qualify for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's tax-credit exchange program, to help Gulf Coast state housing agencies exchange difficult to utilize tax credits for grants to build much needed additional affordable housing units.
- Congress and the White House to enact the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (HR 2269) a recently introduced piece of federal legislation co-sponsored by Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Biloxi, MS), Joseph Cao (R-New Orleans, LA), Rodney Alexander (R-Quitman, LA) and Charlie Melancon (D-Houma, LA) to create 100,000 jobs for survivors to rebuild their communities and restore the environment, including vital natural flood protection to create a more sustainable and equitable Gulf Coast[5].
- Overhaul the Stafford Act and other disaster response and planning legislation to ensure human rights are protected in preparation for, during and after future disasters and to incorporate the lessons learned during Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike.

References:

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4. *American Prospect*, "Why is the U.S. Treasury Excluding the Gulf Coast from Stimulus Benefits", June 10th 2009:

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5. *New Orleans Times Picayune*, “Unlikely Allies back bill for Gulf Coast jobs”, June 1st, 2009: <http://www.nola.com/news/?/base/news-1/1243833645183980.xml&coll=1>

Source: Hope Community Development Agency, Biloxi, MS (hopecda.org)