

Testimony of
Tanya Harris
Association of Community
Organizations for Reform Now

Before the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Of the
United States Senate

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Good Afternoon, my name is Tanya Harris and I am a community organizer for ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. I am also a Katrina Survivor; I was born and raised in the lower ninth ward of New Orleans. Luckily my family had the resources to leave when Katrina hit. Eventually we ended up staying in a shelter right outside of Baton Rouge in Gonzales, LA, there we reconnected with ACORN. There were also volunteers there from the Red Cross who didn't seem ready to deal with a disaster this big. Even though we were in their shelter we had very little access to information, there was information on how to get out of Louisiana but if you were looking services where we were you couldn't find anything. There were about 1500 people there and only five phones and two computers. The only way that we got to services was word of mouth.

We have been active ACORN members for twenty years and ACORN was a piece of home for us when I didn't know when we would be able to get back. So I started working with ACORN doing a different type of community organizing, not door to door, but bed to bed in shelters. And at the same time that my family found ACORN in Baton Rouge, ACORN offices in other cities started to reach out to Katrina survivors, and New Orleans ACORN Members were pointed to their nearest ACORN office through ACORN's website and hotline in Houston, in Los Angeles, in San Antonio, in Dallas, in Arkansas, in Atlanta and even in New York. ACORN members all over were offering their homes and their assistance to their brothers and sisters who had been affected by the Hurricane.

And ACORN starting hearing back from survivors, there were many questions and concerns. And we searched for the answers. Some of them we found after hours and days and multiple calls to FEMA and other government agencies. Many of the answers we had to provide ourselves.

That's when the ACORN Housing Corporation started to send their housing counselors all over the country to work with displaced homeowners to contact their mortgage lenders. We found out that even though many large lenders had decided to stop foreclosures on homes, several smaller companies were still expecting people to pay their mortgages in full and on time. And if they didn't homeowners were slapped with large fees and the threat of losing their homes. ACORN took on lenders like Ocwen Loan Services for continuing to charge prepayment fees and we won.

Next after searching for help to get homes rebuilt in New Orleans, we decided to start our own program. We raised over a million dollars and hired crews to remove debris, rip out drywall, sanitize homes to get rid of the mold and of course tarping roofs to prevent any more water damage. So far the ACORN Home Clean Out Demonstration Program has cleaned out over seven hundred homes, and we plan to have one thousand done before the end of March.

As government assistance started to run out ACORN looked to work with our allies to ensure that Katrina Survivors got all of the financial assistance that they could, so last month we announced our partnership with the William Jefferson Clinton Foundation to

do Earned Income Tax Credit outreach. As a partner in the EITC Program, ACORN's Katrina Benefits Access Project will provide EITC screening and free tax preparation services to victims of Hurricane Katrina.

There is a lot of work to be done in rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. And the work that has been completed would have been easier if only we had the leadership of the federal government to look to. ACORN helped start NOAH, New Opportunities for Advocacy and Hope. This coalition held a rally in support of Louisiana workers getting contracts and fair pay in the rebuilding process and won the reinstatement of Davis Bacon. We also attended meetings with members of VOAD, but not much has come of it. We need the government to play a leading role.

ACORN would like to be a part of a comprehensive disaster relief plan that is formulated, because we know New Orleans. The people who live there have been our members for decades, and we are dedicated to doing everything possible to assist people in the rebuilding process, to make sure that every voice is heard during decision making, and to ensure the right of return for the many who are scattered through out the country.

We couldn't wait for the federal government to rebuild our lives, but we would like to work with you to make sure that there is an overall disaster relief plan that includes every person in our city.