

Supportive housing could save lives

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One of the best ways our community can remember and honor the more than 1,500 people who died in Hurricane Katrina is to make sure there is safe, appropriate housing for the disabled in the New Orleans area.

When the levees failed, the whole world watched in horror as New Orleanians struggled for survival. As the waters rose, people spent days trapped in attics and on rooftops in broiling heat. Thousands languished without food and water at the Superdome and Convention Center.

Many of those who stayed behind were elderly or disabled. Some had resisted the entreaties of family members to leave. Many, however, were poor, living in substandard housing and lacking sufficient supports in the community that could have enabled them to evacuate.

The tragedy of Katrina brings the opportunity to systematically improve the way people with mental or physical disabilities and elderly people with special needs are housed in our community. A proven strategy known as supportive housing, which has the capacity to transform the lives of our most vulnerable citizens, is part of the Louisiana Recovery Authority's plan.

The supportive housing model provides affordable apartments linked to services that are designed to enable residents to live independently while preventing homelessness or costly institutionalization. People receive needed mental and physical health care, get help to make sure they can pay rent and otherwise be good tenants and get assistance finding employment if possible. Supportive housing apartments would be scattered around the city, fully integrating residents into the community.

Around the nation, supportive housing has been proven in research studies to be a cost-effective alternative to institutionalized settings for people with a variety of disabilities. It also has been proven effective in preventing homelessness. In fact, it has been shown to have a stabilizing effect on neighborhoods and to serve as a catalyst for redevelopment.

In the 2000 census, almost 250,000 residents of the New Orleans metropolitan area were disabled. Of these, almost 25,000 people were blind or deaf, over 100,000 people had significant mobility impairments, and almost 65,000 people reported mental disabilities. The number of disabled people in New



STAFF FILE PHOTO

New Orleans police officers carry an elderly woman near the Broad Street overpass Aug. 30.

Orleans is not unique for an urban area, according to Daniel Sutherland of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

We have been asked whether people with disabilities should be living in post-Katrina New Orleans, given the current inadequacies of medical care and public transportation. But the fact is that disabled people are already here. Since Katrina, the Metropolitan Human Services District has served 7,856 people with mental illness and 642 people with developmental disabilities in Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. In March, the Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority served 2,134 people with disabilities; the agency reports that it has more disabled clients now than it did before Katrina. And according to surveys of local agencies, at least 1,500 disabled people are homeless, living on the streets and in homeless facilities in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish.

The time to plan for supportive housing is now. We cannot ignore the needs of the disabled persons who are already here. At the same time, we must

plan for the future, and planning and developing supportive housing takes time. Appropriations, which have historically been supported by both Republicans and Democrats, are currently pending before Congress.

"People with disabilities want to go back home, just like everybody else," says Nell Hahn of the Advocacy Center, a Louisiana disability rights group. The rich culture of New Orleans owes much to the prevalence of large, closely-knit extended families. As people return home, they do not want to leave their parents, siblings and cousins with disabilities behind.

In the rebuilding of an inclusive city, people with disabilities — like everyone else — ought to be welcomed back with the housing and services they need.

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Martha Kegel is executive director and Brenda Richard-Montgomery is board chairperson of UNITY of Greater New Orleans, a collaborative of 60 agencies working to end and prevent homelessness. For more information, see the Web site of the Corporation for Supportive Housing at www.csh.org.