

ROOT SHOCK INSTITUTE

Assisting Cities During Post-Hurricane Diaspora

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“Root shock” is the traumatic stress that people suffer when they have lost all or part of their emotional ecosystem. The Root Shock Institute studies upheaval and recovery in places around the globe. We have learned that rebuilding human communities requires attention to social and emotional problems that fall outside of the scope of present-day humanitarian efforts. Our goal in this and other publications is to raise awareness of the critical need for mindfully re-rooting people after upheaval.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we face a unique situation: cities rendered uninhabitable and their residents in diaspora around the United States. Some parts of the emergency are obvious: insuring safety, creating temporary respite, finding new schools and housing, and providing income for people far from work and home. These tasks are underway.

What is less obvious – and thus often overlooked in post-disaster situations – is the need to reknit social connections at the level of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the region. This reconnection serves a crucial psychiatric function of restoring natural networks that are essential for health and daily functioning. It lays the social and emotional basis for the longterm rebuilding effort that lies ahead. Our research has identified four interventions that lead to mindful re-rooting:

1) Connect every organization to every organization.

Cities are made up of organizations that range from businesses to civic groups to churches to block associations. Every citizen is engaged with one or more organizations. In order to create connections among the organizations in diaspora, New Orleans and other cities will require the support of the internet. “City-in-Exile” websites should be immediately created, and a call made for every leader of every organization to call in to set-up a web page. All of the tools of the internet – chat rooms, blogs, etc – should be available to facilitate communication. It is essential to ensure that the poor in diaspora have access to the internet.

2) Ensure that every citizen has the means to return home.

The evacuation of a city is a crucial moment in its history. Many (up to 90% in some of the affected cities) will find themselves without the flood insurance needed to rebuild their homes. Speculators will be lining up to acquire this valuable real estate. If people are discouraged, they will sell their land, thinking it is their only choice. Those who do return will find a very different city from the one they left. In the current climate of gentrification, this could be a city that has managed to eject the poor, and place them in permanent refugee camps. While the idea of a city full of wealthy residents gladdens the

hearts of retailers, such exclusion will destroy New Orleans as we have known it. It will also create grave problems for the cities that become the new homes of those permanently displaced. The city leaders, supported by the nation, must address this issue promptly and put mechanisms in place to suppress real estate speculation.

3) Engage every citizen in envisioning the future.

In such a disaster, the news tends to focus on the heartbreaking loss of loved ones. Yet for people who have lived for generations in the New Orleans or other affected cities, the loss of those places carries its own kind of pain, often experienced as a sense of dread, confusion, weakness or nausea. People do not cry in anguish over the loss of their city, but they do experience a deep sinking sensation that can endure for years, if not decades. In order to give people hope, it is essential that they be engaged in envisioning the future of the city. Citizens also benefit from hearing from people from other cities that have faced calamity. The Mayor of New Orleans pointed out that that city looks like Hiroshima: in fact, the citizens of Hiroshima have much to teach those of New Orleans.

4) Let holidays and festivals support the healing.

Holidays and festivals are times when people congregate in various groupings. These events give order to the cycle of life, and reinforce the group's concern with itself. Paramount among festivals is New Orleans' Mardi Gras, which has national significance as a unique and important celebration of life. The preparations for the festival have been disrupted by the flood, and it may be impossible to return in time. Leaders of the city and leaders of Mardi Gras must immediately begin to rethink this year's festival. They must answer questions like: Where will it be held? What kind of festival is appropriate in the aftermath of such a tragic event? How will the appropriate floats be built and costumes made? How can people from around the US help? Just as New Orleans' has jazz funerals, it may that a jazz Mardi Gras, led by the Marsalis Family and other jazz greats, will be a time of healing for the city and the nation.

These four recommendations are based on recovery experiences of cities around the globe. More information is contained in the following publications of researchers of the Root Shock Institute:

Fullilove MT. *Root Shock:How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It*, One World/Ballantine Books, New York, June 2004.

Fullilove MT, Hernandez-Cordero L, Madoff JS, Fullilove RE. Promoting collective recovery through organizational mobilization: the post-9/11 disaster relief work of NYC RECOVERS, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 2004;36:479-489.

Fullilove, MT. Promoting social cohesion to improve health, *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association* 1998;53:72-76.

Fullilove MT. Psychiatric implications of displacement: contributions from the psychology of place. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 1996;153:1516-1523.