

Signs of Life in New Orleans

Outreach Teams from UNITY travel the city at night, looking for people living in homelessness, gaining their trust, and working to get them into permanent housing. Each person they encounter has a story. Each person has a different set of circumstances that brought them to living on our streets and in abandoned buildings. UNITY Outreach Workers Mike Miller, Shamus Rohn and other staff members share these stories on our blog, Signs of Life in New Orleans, at: www.blog.unitygno.org. Here is an excerpt from Shamus Rohn, Director of our Abandoned Building Outreach Project:

“Uh, we’ve got a situation.” These were Mike’s words just before noon as we were checking out an old factory building along the river. We had been there before, knew the building, and – in an atypical move – allowed ourselves to get separated.

I got the call five minutes into a discussion with two squatters, both appearing to be strung out and lacking sleep.

“Mike, I’m standing here with two guys and they say there’s another guy on the third floor of the front building.” Mike’s response: “Yeah, I know, I just met Donald. Meet me at the van.”

Once I got back to the van, Mike informed me that Donald was on the third floor of the front building. He was actively suicidal, and in the last few weeks he had drunk from a bottle of antifreeze, tried overdosing on pills, and failed in an attempt to hang himself on the roof the night before. Mike knew he needed to go to the hospital, but talking a suicidal fifty-year old man out of his squat in a crumbling factory isn’t the type of thing you do one-on-one.

We went back up and Mike introduced me to Donald. He remained seated, staring out the window over the river and past our van – he saw us get out of the van and come into the building without answering our yells or even standing up... he was in one of the deepest states of depression I’ve ever seen, seemingly near catatonic.

He had had nothing to drink but the ammonia-tasting water (his description) that came from the taps in the factory. He’d not eaten in days, possibly a week. He lost track of time, saying his watch stopped working on the 19th and he hadn’t left the building since. We were meeting him on the 30th. He’d been in this suicidal state at least eleven days.

After talking about no longer being what he used to be – meaning he was



UNITY Outreach Team member Shamus Rohn searching an abandoned factory

once successful and independent – he looked at us and said “Part of me is thinking about getting out of here. Part of me wants to tell you guys to get lost. But I’m leaning toward getting out of here.”

That was good enough for us. Mike called the situation into the Crisis Unit and arranged for us to drop Donald off at the ER where he would be fast tracked into the psychiatric department.

It took almost five minutes to get Donald down the three flights of stairs to the ground floor, due to the fact that he needed to take a break every nine or ten steps. Once on the ground floor he sat on a pile of bricks for a few minutes while he gathered the strength to walk out to the van.

At the hospital we were met by the folks from the Crisis Unit and they took over tending to Donald. We checked back in on him today and found out that he is currently on dialysis having nearly destroyed his kidneys, likely in part due

to the antifreeze. His blood was becoming septic when we got him to the hospital. We don’t know how long he’ll be there, but discharge is not likely in the immediate future. He is still gravely depressed.

In the homeless services world we say that housing saves lives. **I think that this might be the rare case when outreach itself saved a life.** Donald didn’t have the physical strength nor motivation to get out of that building on his own. He had no way to call 911. We may well have stumbled across a cold body if we’d waited a few more days to go to the factory. Many people don’t understand what is going on in the abandoned buildings. People are living and dying in them when we finally arrive. Many people we talk to remind us of how dangerous the clients we meet could be. I have to keep reminding these folks of how sick they actually are.



HOMeward BOUND

UNITY and Sen. Landrieu Led Campaign for Congressional Funding

Rent Vouchers 'Matter of Life or Death' for Homeless

Ms. G. finally has a home. She suffers from mental illness and a seizure disorder and had lived on the streets for many of her 61 years. Before she was rescued from an abandoned building in Central City by the UNITY Welcome Home Outreach Team, she lived in a broken down pick-up truck. Prior to that she stayed in a flooded-out trailer in New Orleans East – until it burnt to the ground. She is now getting her life on track – living in a safe and clean affordable apartment on the West Bank, attending all her medical appointments, and beginning mental health treatment -- because of a state Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) initiative created as a result of nearly three years of advocacy led by UNITY of Greater New Orleans, with help from a wide array of government and nonprofit partners.

Designed to help the most vulnerable residents of hurricane-devastated areas, the state Permanent Supportive Housing initiative combines affordable housing with supportive service teams overseen by the state Department of Health and Hospitals who visit people with mental or physical disabilities in their apartments to link them with community-based services and do whatever is necessary to keep them stably housed. The program is designed for extremely low-income people with disabilities who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, or unnecessarily institutionalized.

"This initiative created something incredibly positive in the aftermath of one of our nation's greatest tragedies, providing a way for some of the most vulnerable residents of our region to get the housing and supports they needed all along," said Martha Kegel, director of UNITY and co-chair of the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition.

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Photo courtesy of the Times Picayune

A UNITY client living in an abandoned building. Rebuilding Communities vouchers provide an alternative to people living in buildings like this.

UNITY to Receive National Award

UNITY is the recipient of the 2010 Nonprofit Sector Achievement Award for extraordinary work in the struggle to end homelessness, bestowed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the pre-eminent organization in the field. UNITY will be presented the award at a ceremony on the evening of April 22 at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The other award recipients at the ceremony to honor outstanding contributions to ending homelessness will be Senator Patty Murray, D-Wash., Chair of the Senate appropriations subcommittee on housing, and Virgin Mobile Corporation.

"In the world of homelessness, this

is the rough equivalent of a Lombardi Trophy!" said UNITY director Martha Kegel, after receiving news of the honor. "Our deepest thanks go to all the members of our winning team! This award reflects the hard work of all our member organizations, UNITY's board and staff, our government, nonprofit and foundation partners, and all our supporters in our community and across the nation. Because of this wonderful coming together of compassionate people, each contributing in their own way, the New Orleans area is being recognized for its accomplishments in tackling a humanitarian crisis that threatens our community's recovery."

WHO DAT!

UNITY

of Greater New Orleans

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UNITY of Greater New Orleans is a nonprofit organization leading a coalition of 60 organizations providing housing and services for the homeless. Our mission is to coordinate community partnerships to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness in the New Orleans area.

In addition to raising and distributing funds to support our member organizations' work, UNITY conducts homeless outreach on the streets and in abandoned buildings, rehabs apartment buildings, helps the public locate affordable housing, and advocates for public policy to prevent and reduce homelessness.

Homelessness in New Orleans by the Numbers

11,500

Number of persons homeless on a given night in 2009 in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish -- nearly double the Pre-Katrina number of 6,300. (Over the course of the year, the number of homeless people was estimated to be three times this figure - over 33,000 persons).

19,468

Number of homeless persons in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish to whom UNITY and its 60 member organizations provided housing and services in 2009.



abandoned buildings in post-Katrina New Orleans. I am deeply grateful for the many generous people who helped protect our city's most vulnerable during those ten days. The donations of blankets, warm clothing and funds for emergency respite housing were overwhelming. Special thanks also to our volunteers and the heroic staffs of five shelters that exceeded their capacity and stayed open long hours to try to meet the need, and the city of New Orleans, for opening a sixth shelter. By all coming together, lives were saved and a community's fabric was strengthened.

In such a time of crisis, the value of a collaborative such as UNITY of Greater New Orleans is profound.

UNITY Outreach Teams worked around the clock with the NOPD Homeless Assistance Unit to find and shelter medically fragile homeless persons and to distribute blankets and warm clothes to people who remained on the streets or in abandoned buildings.

Under the city's freeze plan five of UNITY's member agencies-- Ozanam Inn, New Orleans Mission, Salvation Army Center of Hope, Bridge House, and Covenant House-- were allowed to cram their facilities beyond capacity. The city deserves praise for setting up a sixth temporary shelter in cooperation with the Red Cross at a community center in



Photo courtesy of the Times Picayune

Director's Message

New Orleans experienced an unusually hard freeze in January that endangered the lives of many of the thousands of homeless people who live on the streets and in

Central City. The temporary shelter was staffed by Health Care for the Homeless and the City of New Orleans Health Department, under the leadership of Willie Mae Martin and Dr. Kevin Stephens. During the weekend of January 8-10, over 130 homeless individuals received a warm bed at the temporary shelter, as well as delicious meals provided by First Baptist Church of New Orleans. Companionship was provided by 40 volunteers from the church and 20 other volunteers that UNITY recruited.

I am grateful to UNITY Deputy Director Vicki Judice and Director of Programs Angela Patterson, who organized UNITY's intense outreach efforts and the volunteer staffing at the overflow shelter. Vicki wrote on the UNITY blog (www.blog.unitygno.org) about the last person that she and a volunteer were able to transport to the shelter one night, an elderly man who was sitting outside of the locked door of the bus station and rocking back and forth to the piped music. He was blind in one eye and nearly deaf. When offered a ride to the city overflow shelter where he was promised he would be safe and warm, he eagerly accepted. On the way to the shelter, Vicki could hear him murmur over and over: "Safe and warm, safe and warm."

Thank you again to everyone who helped ensure that many of our most vulnerable community members were "safe and warm" when their lives were threatened by dangerously cold weather. As we enjoy the afterglow of our beloved Saints' first Super Bowl Victory, let's also celebrate the tremendous compassion our community shows for vulnerable people. Let's resolve to redouble our efforts to provide permanent housing to all those in our community who remain homeless, so that their lives are never again threatened by a freeze or health-destroying rigors of living on the streets for months or years.

Post-Katrina Housing Crisis Garner Attention from UN

During the summer and fall of 2009, UNITY's outreach team assisted United Nations officials in investigating the city's crisis of abandoned building homelessness throughout the city. The UN's Advisory Group on Forced Evictions (AGFE) and its Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing visited New Orleans to examine the city's affordable housing problems.

During the visits, UNITY briefed UN officials on the unprecedented crisis of homelessness in New Orleans as a result of Hurricane Katrina and led them on tours of abandoned buildings throughout the city. "We agree with the United Nations that housing should be considered a basic human right," said Martha Kegel, executive director of UNITY.

Shamus Rohn, Director of the UNITY No One Suffers Alone Abandoned Building Project, reported that approximately 6,000 persons are living in abandoned buildings in New Orleans as of a 2009 count. Mr. Rohn also reported that abandoned building dwellers exhibit a high rate of disability and tend to be older and more vulnerable than other street homeless populations.

UN officials met Mickey, a 57-year-old squatter who spent most of his life as a merchant seaman. The housing experts were shocked at the conditions of Mickey's "squat" – an abandoned hospital still littered with debris and medical paraphernalia that had never been cleaned out or repaired since Katrina. Before Katrina, Mickey worked as a handyman and rented an apartment for \$450 per month. Mickey lost all of his tools and possessions to the storm, left without a place to live or a livelihood.

UN officials also met Grace and Naomi,



Executive Director Martha Kegel and Congressman Anh "Joseph" Cao meet with U.N. delegation

who were living in a flooded house never repaired and lacking utilities or running water. Both women suffer from disabilities – Naomi in a wheel chair with a leg injury that never properly healed and Grace with a steel plate in her face and an oozing facial infection resulting from an attack while living on the streets. The roof on their home leaked onto the rotting floorboards and the windows had to be kept closed even in the heat of summer to keep mosquitoes out. Ms. Grace told the experts, "I didn't always live like this. I worked and paid rent all my life."

The abandoned building tours illustrated the connection between mental illness and homelessness in the Post-Katrina environment. Brian, a former trucker whose apartment in St. Bernard Parish was flooded and never repaired, suffers from mental illness and has been chronically homeless for the past two years once he stopped receiving FEMA assistance. Brian was found in a crumbling two-story flooded building in the 7th ward – his network of family and neighborhood supports he once relied on was never able to return after the storm. U.N. officials also met Johnny and Carolyn, an elderly brother and sister both suffering from mental illness. Johnny and Carolyn tried their best to create a semblance of a home out of the ruins of a gutted



U.N. delegate shows support and friendship to UNITY client

abandoned house by creating "walls" out of corrugated political campaign signs.

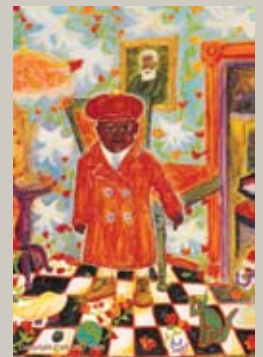
After meeting with abandoned buildings squatters and viewing their living conditions, UN official Leilani Farha stated, "It's unacceptable. These people lived in decent places before Katrina." She asked why resources to re-house them are coming at such a slow rate of speed. Raquel Rolnik, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, expressed shock at the living conditions of New Orleans' abandoned building dwellers and promised to try to help them. She stated that the affordable housing crisis has affected New Orleans more than any other U.S. city she has visited and likened the living conditions in abandoned buildings to favelas – shanty towns with no utilities that often house the displaced – in her native country of Brazil.

Want to support UNITY's vital work to end homelessness? Support the UNITY Notecard Project.

All proceeds from the sale of these special notecards, featuring the work of local artists Sandra Russell Clark, Paul Deo, George Long, and Ellen McCord, will support UNITY's work.



Contact UNITY at (504) 821-4496 for more information and to purchase a set of these unique and beautiful notecards. Or visit "Products" at www.unitygno.org to order online.



Rent vouchers-- Continued from p. 1

UNITY helped launch the initiative less than two months after the hurricanes struck, spearheading advocacy efforts before Congress, the Louisiana Recovery Authority, and the Louisiana Housing Finance Agency; co-founding the statewide Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition; and working closely with Senator Mary Landrieu, the champion of the initiative on Capitol Hill, and the entire Louisiana congressional delegation. An intensive citizen involvement and media advocacy campaign -- assisted by the Louisiana Advocacy Coalition for the Homeless, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Technical Assistance Collaborative, Advocacy Center, Downtown Development District, Common Ground Community, the Equity and Inclusion Campaign, and many other nonprofits and government partners -- succeeded in persuading the U.S. House of Representatives to fund a measure previously adopted by the Senate to provide more than 3000 permanent rent vouchers for the most vulnerable residents of hurricane-stricken Louisiana.

Ms. Grace is housed thanks to the UNITY

Rebuilding Communities program, a key component of the state PSH initiative. UNITY Rebuilding Communities, operated in partnership with the state Office of Community Development and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), identifies the 875 most vulnerable of the thousands of disabled persons who are living in more than 61,000 abandoned properties, on the streets, or in emergency shelter in New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson Parish. UNITY then finds them apartments in the private rental market, and provides rent subsidies to them. The program provides landlords with fair market rent while ensuring that homeless people with severe mental or physical disabilities can be housed without having to pay more than a third of their income for rent. Clients are stabilized in their housing through supportive services provided by nonprofit organizations contracting with the Office of Aging and Adult Services Region 1 and Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority.

Every Friday, the UNITY outreach team meets to decide which homeless persons get the next group of rent vouchers based on their score on the Vulnerability Index, an

evaluation tool based on homeless mortality research which predicts who is most likely to die if left unhoused. Criteria include the amount of time a person has been homeless and medical factors.

"The rent vouchers are a matter of life and death for our clients," said Angela Patterson, director of programs at UNITY. "And without the services linked to the housing, our vulnerable clients could not be stably housed in the community. But we need to expand our outreach and housing search staff to meet the overwhelming need of disabled homeless people for Permanent Supportive Housing."

UNITY also is still searching for financing for Permanent Supportive Housing apartment buildings to be owned and operated by local nonprofits -- a key part of the PSH initiative which has not yet been funded. UNITY and its partner organizations own five small-to-moderate scale buildings scattered throughout the city but need funds to rehab the buildings. The buildings would have on-site services, 24-hour security, and professional building staff.

Home for the Holidays UNITY Spreads Cheer to Formerly Homeless

Thanksgiving at Home

On Wednesday, November 25th, eight families at the UNITY owned and operated LaSalle Street Permanent Supportive Housing apartment building were surprised with Thanksgiving baskets, filled with ham, turkey, fresh seafood and many household items.

A special thanks to the generosity of Ms. Lilliane "Tweet" Colar for coordinating this event and the following churches, part of UNITY's Interfaith Initiative to End

Homelessness, for helping to provide these families with a wonderful holiday meal:

- St. Stephen Missionary Baptist Church
- Greater Providence Baptist Church
- Mount Olive Baptist Church
- Mount Sinai Baptist Church
- Shiloh Baptist Church

To learn more about UNITY's Interfaith Initiative to End Homelessness, contact Catch Patton at kpatton@unitgno.org or 483-9300.



Ms. Helen Madison (center) and her family pictured with their holiday gift basket with "Tweet" Colar (right).

Holiday Party for John's Place



While many companies celebrate the holidays with parties for their employees, UNITY staff chose to celebrate the holiday where their hearts are-- with the families who have been housed through UNITY's work.

On Monday, December 21st, a holiday party was held at UNITY's office for the residents of John's Place, home to some of UNITY's clients. The party was complete with food and refreshments and a visit from New Orleans favorite Santa Claus, Mr. Fred Parker.

Where People Live When They Have NO PLACE TO LIVE

The photographs on the page, taken by UNITY outreach workers, show some of the places where homeless people live in New Orleans. Our outreach teams work during the day to identify signs that homeless people may be sleeping in abandoned buildings or other makeshift shelter on the street.

They return at night to find the people and house them.

