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CONGRESSWOMAN SHEILA JACKSON LEE OF TEXAS

STATEMENT BEFORE THE

KATRINA NATIONAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

HOUSTON, TEXAS
JULY 28, 2006

I thank the Commission for the opportunity to appear before you and offer my testimony about Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster in American history. The magnitude of this natural disaster is rivaled only by the catastrophic failure of the federal government to respond to the massive suffering in a manner befitting the greatest nation in human history.

At the outset, I think it important to draw attention to the recent investigation conducted by the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA). In response to concerns of housing discrimination against persons forced to

evacuate because of Hurricane Katrina, NFHA conducted an investigation of rental housing practices in five states to determine whether victims of Hurricane Katrina would be treated unfairly based on their race.

NFHA conducted tests over the telephone to determine what both African-American and White home seekers were told about unit availability, rent, discounts, and other terms and conditions of apartment leasing.

In 66 percent of those tests – 43 of 65 instances – White callers were favored over African-American callers. In addition, NFHA also conducted five matched pair tests in which persons visited apartment complexes. In those five tests, Whites were favored over African-Americans three times.

Several of these tests revealed egregious types of discrimination, and NFHA has filed administrative complaints with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) against five apartment complexes. According to NFHA, their first goal in taking this action is to remind both apartment seekers and housing providers that housing discrimination is illegal.

The second NFHA goal was to hold accountable the housing providers who have discriminated on the basis of race and national origin. The results of this investigation bring me to say one thing, all races have been impacted by Hurricane Katrina and thus all races are in need of

assistance. This is not a time for racism, but a time for compassion and understanding.

Let me also note that in my Congressional District in Houston tens of thousands of evacuees have been sheltered and fed. In fact, Americans throughout this country have stepped up to help those affected by this disaster. It demonstrates that once again in our darkest hour that we have united as a nation to help our brothers and sisters who now seek to rebuild their lives.

As we sit here today we must find steps to move forward to help those affected by this disaster and to try to prevent such an ineffective response from taking place again. To this end, I co-sponsored the bill introduced by the Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Congressman Melvin Watt.

H.R. 4197, the Hurricane Katrina Recovery, Reclamation, Restoration, Reconstruction and Reunion Act of 2005, provides for the determination of eligibility for compensation for any individual (or relatives of a deceased individual) who sustained economic or non-economic losses as a result of Hurricane Katrina so that the individual (or relatives) are restored as nearly as possible to their condition before Hurricane Katrina. In addition, the bill:

- ? Directs the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a Comprehensive Environmental Sampling and Toxicity Assessment Plan.
- ? Provides for federal and state government to notify hurricane survivors of health risks they may face upon returning to their domiciles.
- ? Provides for the offer of alternative land and/or housing as compensation to residents whose homes or businesses have been destroyed or terminally compromised.
- ? Revises the TANF Emergency Response and Recovery Act of 2005 to provide for reimbursement of states for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits provided under part A of title IV of the Social Security Act to families from other states affected by Hurricane Katrina.
- ? Sets forth requirements relating to emergency extended unemployment compensation.
- ? Requires the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish a program of emergency health coverage continuation relief.
- ? Sets forth housing and education requirements.
- ? Displaced Citizens Voter Protection Provisions of 2005 - Prescribes requirements for the protection of voting rights of Katrina evacuees.
- ? Prescribes requirements for: (1) regulatory relief for financial services; and (2) disaster loans and small business relief.
- ? Amends the Internal Revenue Code to provide for: (1) a tax credit for an eligible homebuyer who purchases a principal residence in the Hurricane Katrina disaster area; (2) an increase in the housing credit dollar amount; and (3) tax-exempt bonds for qualified Gulf Coast recovery projects.
- ? Hurricane Katrina Bankruptcy Relief and Community Protection Act of 2005 - Amends the federal bankruptcy code to exempt victims of natural disasters, including small businesses, from certain requirements for debtors seeking relief.
- ? Directs the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to establish a temporary flood insurance buy-in program.
- ? Expresses the sense of Congress that the President should present, within six months, a plan to eradicate poverty in the United States by 2015.

In addition to co-sponsoring H.R. 4197, I also have introduced legislation granting a minimum of 20,000 two-year tenant-based housing assistance vouchers for Katrina's victims, together with transportation and relocation assistance to be used where necessary. These vouchers should be administered by local housing agencies presently administering HUD-funded Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher assistance, which are located in or near the areas hardest hit by Katrina. These agencies are already positioned to provide housing assistance and can play an extremely helpful role meeting the immediate housing needs of Katrina's victims.

My legislation would also allow the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to issue a wide range of statutory and regulatory waivers in order to most effectively and flexibly utilize HUD resources to meet the needs of victims.

Before closing, I would like to briefly mention my efforts in working with FEMA and senior Department of Homeland Security officials to ameliorate the suffering of Katrina evacuees who were relocated to Houston and mitigate the financial impact on the City of Houston of its incredible generosity in welcoming thousands of Katrina survivors. These efforts include:

- ? Extending the opportunity for plane tickets home past December 31, 2005 and providing outreach to displaced Hurricane Katrina survivors so they would be made aware that FEMA would be providing such tickets, after the December 31st deadline.
- ? Continuing payments on FEMA approved housing agreements that the City of Houston made with local landlords to house Katrina and Rita survivors. **I am happy to announce that FEMA has agreed to extend housing assistance to eligible recipients until at least October 31, 2006, and in certain cases until March 1, 2007.**
- ? Using equitable funding and support for Hurricanes Rita and Katrina displaced persons who are in impacted states such as Texas, and for other costs such as educational and health expenses.
- ? Following my visit to New Orleans with FEMA officials and my participation in the Congressional hearings on the aftermath of Katrina in which Governor Blanco was present, one of the issues that became obvious was that of providing utility service to travel trailers placed throughout the Gulf Coast. I would like to see some federal supervision and assistance to the public utilities so that power can be turned on in the regions of the Gulf Coast so that travel trailers can be placed on the property of individual homeowners and so that electricity, water and sewage can be speedily connected.
- ? I would also like to be advised of the status of work preformed by the Army Corps of Engineers that would move the reconstruction of levees along as soon as possible. I have requested full funding of the levee repair as the state of Louisiana has requested.
- ? During the Congressional Katrina aftermath hearing, I demanded “that the administration restore the levees quickly and efficiently.” I did not then, and do not now, think it a good idea to do a quick fix when the residents of the city clearly want the job done right.

In conclusion, as a senior member of House Homeland Security Committee, I called for the establishment of a Commission to study the

genesis of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. We still need a 9/11 style commission to know everything that took place. In addition, I have called for the establishment of a position of an ombudsman for FEMA in order to provide proper oversight. Without a proper investigation we can not get all the answers and without the answers we can not provide the necessary legislation and oversight needed to try to prevent this kind of human suffering from happening again in the future.

This completes my statement. I look forward to answering any questions the Commission may have. Thank you.