

Inner cities need disaster relief, too

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson
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New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie recently spoke at a conference sponsored by the Clinton Global Initiative in Chicago on disaster recovery in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, which caused an estimated \$39 billion in damage in New Jersey. Christie talked through the plans for rebuilding after the initial steps to get power and water back up and return the area to “normalcy,” using some \$60 billion in federal relief contributions.

A disaster like Sandy causes a structural dislocation beyond local capacity. Storms, tornados, earthquakes and sudden deindustrialization are all disasters. Houses and roads are destroyed; the local economy is ruined; small businesses go belly up. In response, the federal government steps in, provides aid, works with governors and local officials to lay out a plan for redevelopment.

The shore neighborhoods slammed by Sandy and the communities hit by tornadoes in Oklahoma or floods in North Dakota all deserve aid. Yet we witness a disaster in cities across our nation that is equally devastating, equally beyond anyone’s fault, and yet essentially ignored at the national level.

In our inner city neighborhoods, we witness mass unemployment, with businesses going bankrupt. By 2010, in 25 of the nation’s largest metropolitan regions, fewer than 55 percent of working-age black men were employed. The afflicted neighborhoods suffer radical housing depletion from foreclosures and abandonment. Since Jan. 1, 2010, there have been 18,949 vacant buildings reported in Chicago. On average, 19 new buildings are reported every day. Many neighborhoods suffer from sharp reductions in public services — transit, postal service, health services. Schools are closed and teachers laid off.

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Instead of a plan for recovery, these neighborhoods are provided a plan for containment. School discipline policies force students out of school and toward detention.

Drug policies are used for mass arrests. Ohio State law professor Michelle Alexander reports that “about 90 percent of those sentenced to prison for a drug offense in Illinois are African American,” though studies show that whites are more likely to use and sell drugs.

The inner city deserves a disaster relief plan — one that includes things like insurance relief, federal aid, a development bank and loans. The inner city needs reconstruction and infrastructure. Just as the shore communities of New Jersey needed a plan for recovery and development after a natural disaster, so do our inner city neighborhoods ravaged by forces beyond their control.

The disaster that has afflicted our inner cities is as remorseless and as powerful as that that ravaged the shores of New Jersey, the wildfires spreading in Colorado, the tornadoes that have devastated parts of several states. It is time for action.

When there is a disaster, few complain about federal help, few say the relief should come only from the state or private entities. No one says that the people in the path of the storm are on their own. As Gov. Christie said at that Chicago conference:

“No one in my state was arguing to me that Tuesday, Oct. 30, ‘Governor, you should privatize the response to this storm from here on out,’ ” he said. “This is one of those things that, regardless of where you fall on the ideological spectrum, you would agree that this is government’s responsibility.”

Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the work of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org.