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Pastor's Column

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“PICO UPDATE: Rebuilding Louisiana”

(I am pleased to share with you this communication from Rev. Jennifer Jone-Bridgett, the Executive Director of PICO LIFT in New Orleans:)

On June 15, 2006, President Bush signed an emergency spending bill that includes \$4.2 billion to fully fund Louisiana's Road Home housing plan, \$3.7 billion for additional levee repairs and \$400 million for Katrina Cottages. The approval of this funding is a great victory after months of pressure by PICO and others on Congress and President Bush to fully meet their commitments to the region.

Under the Louisiana Road Home plan, homeowners who lacked insurance will receive as much as \$150,000 to safely rebuild their home or relocate. Louisiana will use some of the federal block grant funds to build or restore 31,000+ affordable rental apartments. Congress also approved a \$400 million pilot program that will allow private agencies to apply for financing to build “Katrina Cottages” as alternative to small and expensive FEMA travel trailers.

The decision to compensate uninsured homeowners and provide funds for rebuilding housing reflects a consensus that the devastation that followed Katrina and Rita was the direct result of design and construction flaws in the Federal levees meant to protect the region and the belief that with careful planning New Orleans can be safely rebuilt.

PICO LIFT is disappointed that Congress cut \$100 million in rental housing assistance that would have helped build 13,500 apartments for the lowest-income victims of Katrina. It is wrong to ignore the needs of low-income families and a mistake to neglect the shortage of affordable rental housing in the state. PICO LIFT will continue to work at a state and local level to assure that housing funds reach those with the greatest need, so that every family that wants to is able to return home.

On behalf of the 100 congregations and tens of thousands of families that are part of PICO LIFT, I want to express our profound gratitude to the thousands of PICO leaders, clergy and friends from across the country who helped press the case for justice for Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. Your efforts in writing letters and making phone calls to the offices of 86 Senators and 248 Representatives and meeting with key Congressional Committee Chairs, such as Congressman Jerry Lewis, and with Appropriation Committee Members and their staff played an important role in this victory.

In September 2005 PICO LIFT launched **Rebuilding Louisiana** as a major organizing drive to assure that low and moderate-income families have a powerful voice in how Louisiana is rebuilt and are able to hold local, state and national officials accountable for transparency, equity and results in funding and planning decisions. Over the coming years we will continue to fight so that promises made are promises kept.

Best wishes,
Rev. Jennifer Jone-Bridgett, Executive Director
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