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Beacons of Hope: How Neighborhood Organizing Led Disaster Recovery

Denise Thornton

After spending five days in the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina as a volunteer evacuee under horrific conditions, I vowed to do something more meaningful with my life if I got out safely.

On February 14, 2006, just six months after the storm, I opened my partially rebuilt home as a respite for my weary neighbors who were also facing decisions without information or government guidance. I formed a grassroots nonprofit organization and called it the Beacon of Hope. My home became a hub of activity and the heartbeat of the neighborhood. It was a place where neighbors could reconnect and get vital information that they would need to make informed decisions about their return.

I had no history of civic involvement or social activism. I was the kind of person who just wrote the check and relied on others to make sure that the homeless got fed and researchers looked for cures to the deadly diseases that plague our world.

I was initially stunned by the scope of the devastation, and I quickly realized that the damage was too vast and the pace of government action would be slow.

I simply didn't want to sit around and wait for someone else to come along and make it better.

Whatever progress we made was made by ordinary citizens, and that is a direct reflection of the resilience of neighbors who took ownership of their circumstance and the generosity of visiting volunteers, united in one cause. That cause was to reclaim the lives we had enjoyed before our city became paralyzed by catastrophic flooding and make them even better than they were before.

The goal of this article is to broaden the scope of your knowledge about New Orleans neighborhoods by describing our revitalization strategies and our common goals, which may be of value to civil society, business, and government leaders in other cities facing social and economic decay. Many have studied us, many have tried to blend into the colorful fabric of our society, but most fall short in truly understanding our rich and diverse culture and our remarkable social structure. This lack of understanding was detrimental to our recovery and is explained in the coming paragraphs.

I began this journey by providing a visual and realistic environment and a road map for others to follow. I remediated my own house, gutted to the studs, cleared all construction debris from the yard, installed sod, planted beautiful flowers, and painted over the big red "X" on the front door placed there by rescue workers. The façade of my house looked exactly as it did before the flood, and yet it was surrounded by devastation and mounds of debris as far as the eye could see. This powerful image gave rise to hope among my neighbors and showed that recovery was possible. Many residents had never managed a construction project and were simply paralyzed by the daunting task before them. My father was a master carpenter, so I grew up around construction.

Denise Thornton is the founder and president of Beacon of Hope Resource Center, a grassroots nonprofit organization created in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Beacon of Hope assisted homeowners and businesses in navigating the complex issues associated with the restoration of their homes and communities by providing a blueprint for reconstruction that aided in the renaissance of twenty-five New Orleans neighborhoods.

But since I was having difficulty, I knew my neighborhood would be doomed unless we joined forces to help each other. My feeling at the time was that everyone had something to offer and we would have to pool all of our resources to get this job done.

On February 14, 2006, I held a press conference and invited our city councilman, district police commander, postmaster, and homeowners association president. Also present to address residents' concerns were representatives from our local power company and our local internet provider, from the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board, and from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Corps of Engineers.

And so we began:

- Serving hot meals six days a week
- Towing away flooded vehicles
- Providing internet access, land line telephones, and fax and copier machines
- Referring high-quality licensed, bonded, and insured contractors
- Hosting seminars on issues such as mold remediation and power restoration
- Hosting group meetings with the corps of engineers
- Hosting monthly block parties
- Organizing thousands of visiting volunteers to help clean vacant properties and gut homes
- Providing a tool-lending library for homeowners and volunteers
- Collecting and disseminating information about residents' intentions to rebuild
- Forming a block captain system
- Mapping the condition of each parcel of land in the neighborhood
- Providing free weekly legal assistance
- Providing help with submitting insurance claims
- Housing the offices for state employees to assist homeowners in completing applications for federal aid through the Road Home program
- Providing first aid
- Providing case workers to help residents qualify for other types of social services and grants

Word soon spread to nearby neighborhoods that help was available through this resource center in my home. We identified leaders who could implement this program and transform their neighborhoods in the next level of recovery. By the end of 2006, eight Beacon of Hope Resource Centers were established in nearby neighborhoods. By mid-year 2008, four more had been opened in the Gentilly area, for a total of twelve, and by 2011, twenty-five Beacon centers were providing services throughout the City of New Orleans.

Affiliate Beacon centers were also established in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, after the flooding in June 2008, and in Bridge City, Texas, in response to Hurricane Ike and in Laplace after Hurricane Isaac. In 2012 we opened the Beacon of Hope New York after Superstorm Sandy.

Beacon of Hope MODEL (Mapping, Outreach, Development, Education, Leadership)

Beacon of Hope develops neighborhoods by educating and empowering leaders to fight blight and

work with various government agencies by mapping the conditions of each parcel of land in the neighborhood using a block captain system. Our outreach programs are designed to determine the needs of homeowners and the community at large.

Beacon of Hope provides a central location for all neighbors to gather, receive information, and obtain basic support. Once we determine the geographic boundaries of the neighborhood and select residents who will take responsibility for implementing the MODEL, we:

- Maintain and post hours of operation, including on at least one day of the weekend
- Designate a volunteer coordinator to organize volunteers and volunteer groups focused on cleaning and maintaining yards and public areas
- Create an advisory committee of individuals willing to assist and support the neighborhood's endeavor
- Designate an area to secure, store, and maintain lawn equipment for property owners and volunteer groups
- Support and nurture the Beacon of Hope MODEL within the geographical boundaries until the neighborhood becomes self-sustaining

The Beacon of Hope MODEL has many strengths. It mobilizes the residents in a very personal and individual way, making full use of their pre-existing social capital, and it nourishes the embodiment of each individual and unique neighborhood. Many of these residents have never served on a board of directors or a volunteer committee before. The MODEL teams engage in a constructive dialogue with local, state, and federal authorities that results in smoother and more efficient practices and governance. The MODEL is transferable to any neighborhood regardless of its demographics with respect to race or income level because the only requirement to light a Beacon is a handful of thoughtful, concerned citizens who want to make a difference in their community.

The *Beacon of Hope administrator* has a central role in the neighborhood. He or she:

- Works with the Beacon of Hope parent for support
- Works with and shares information with homeowners association presidents
- Implements a block captain system and identifies team leaders
- Maintains a page on the Beacon of Hope website and keeps current neighborhood information
- Meets regularly with all committees
- Disseminates information to all residents as reported by various committees
- Insures the highest standard in providing services and resources to the neighborhood

The *block captain lieutenant* maintains contact information on all block captains, works with the Beacon of Hope administrator and homeowners association presidents, and recruits block captains and assigns them to one or more teams. The *block captain* works with volunteer supervisors, identifying infrastructure needs and homeowner needs and disseminating information. Block captains assist the Beacon of Hope administrator and the homeowners association president and coordinate all teams. Each neighborhood is organized into eight teams.

- The *Survey Team* collects data quarterly and delivers it to the data information manager.
- The *Infrastructure Team* works independently of other teams to identify sewer or water leaks, nonfunctioning streetlights, streets in need of repair, and illegal dumping. This

committee reports these issues to the appropriate city department and works with them to resolve these issues.

- The *Outreach Team* works with Beacon of Hope to identify homeowners in need of volunteer services and maintains a record of all homeowner work requests.
- The *Blight Team* works with the Beacon of Hope administrator, the homeowners association presidents, and the Survey Team to eradicate blight using information provided by the data information manager. Beacon of Hope provides quarterly condition maps.
- The *Crime Team* works closely with the New Orleans Police Department or crime prevention unit, keeping the Beacon of Hope administrator and homeowners association presidents apprised of safety concerns. Members of this team attend New Orleans Neighborhood Police Anti-Crime Council meetings and receive weekly Comstat maps and e-mail blasts from the police department on current criminal activity. The Crime Team is the neighborhood liaison for all safety matters. Through the block captain system, the team reports all suspicious activity and keeps the neighborhood informed about all alerts and activity.
- The *Quality of Life Team* is responsible for the well-being of the neighborhood. Its duties include planning block parties, administering the welcome basket program, holding fundraisers or soliciting donations, and organizing other social gatherings such as National Night Out Against Crime.
- The *Greenspace Team* works with the Beacon of Hope director of volunteers, the volunteer coordinator, the volunteer supervisor, the Beacon of Hope administrator and homeowners association presidents, and city agencies to identify public property in need of revitalization.
- The *New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) Team* works with the Beacon of Hope administrator and the homeowners association presidents to identify properties that are eligible for federal grants through the Road Home program, to record the conditions of those properties, and to solicit perspective buyers for the Lot Next Door 3.0 Program. The NORA Team is responsible for corresponding with the New Orleans Office of Recovery to research the buying process of the Lot Next Door program.

The *volunteer coordinator* works with the volunteer supervisor, the Beacon of Hope administrator, homeowners association residents, the Beacon of Hope director of volunteers, and the Outreach Team to determine the number of volunteers and the supplies and equipment needed to complete projects identified by these groups. The volunteer coordinator also monitors opportunities and maintains a record of visiting volunteers, waivers, and release forms and submits them to the Beacon of Hope director of volunteers to include in company stats for the purpose of providing outcomes to funders and to satisfy insurance requirements.

The *volunteer supervisor* works with the volunteer coordinator, the Beacon of Hope director of volunteers, and the Outreach Team and is responsible for supervising the volunteers in service and creating a safe environment for the volunteers to serve. He or she assembles the equipment, sets up the project, trains the volunteers on safety and equipment use, and works with block captains to supervise volunteer projects provided by the Outreach Team.

The *data information manager* must have computer capabilities with an emphasis on Excel spreadsheets because he or she is responsible for updating the master list of properties. All data collected is merged with other Beacon of Hope data for monitoring neighborhood repopulation, encouraging economic development, and eradicating blight. The data information manager also collects the information provided by the Survey Team, the Outreach Team, and the block captains

into a master database and passes it to the Blight Committee, the Beacon of Hope administrator, and the homeowners association presidents. The data is then submitted to the Beacon of Hope parent for input in the master database in order to provide Beacon of Hope administrator, the Blight Team, and the Nora Team with quarterly condition maps.

Mapping: The Community Survey and Data Collection

The Beacon of Hope Resource Center developed a property condition survey that has been collected by residents on the parcel level. Beacon of Hope standardized the survey so that the City of New Orleans and community members receive the same training and collect neighborhood conditions data in the same format. This data tracks the progress of the neighborhood since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (2005). To extend access of this data to neighborhood groups, the Beacon of Hope Resource Center created a centralized data file and a web-enabled repository, Smart Tech. The data viewer allows residents to view prior survey results and, with a secure log-in, to update survey data from remote locations. Typically the frequency of the community survey is based on a three-month cycle.



Figure 1. Individual neighborhoods within the Gentilly area of New Orleans included in the web-based GIS pilot program

Public Participation Geographic Information Systems and Mapping

Beacon of Hope ran a pilot program that used desktop geographic information systems (GIS) technology, then continued with a three-tier program. The Smart Tech web-based community interactive data and mapping system used an internet mapping service (IMS).

ArcGIS9.2 and NeoGeography were introduced to expand the existing mapping and analysis. Data from the IMS was exported into the ArcGIS9.2 system to create a base map and to update the original map series. This project was undertaken to organize, support, and document the creation of a Beacon of Hope GIS that allows flexibility in data collection, maintenance, mapping, and analysis. An important aspect of the project is the capability for residents and other community-based organizations to learn how to create and maintain the data with, or without, direct assistance from Beacon of Hope staff. Additional online documents are available to support the training and site maintenance.

Hurricane Katrina did not discriminate. It cut across all social and economic boundaries. For twenty-one days, 80 percent of our entire city remained under water, collapsing our infrastructure. Fifteen years later, that destruction remains a problem. Katrina also displaced residents, some of whom were never able to return to their homes.

Many of the volunteers who came from all across the United States had never heard of our neighborhoods. But when the national media began reporting extensively about the devastation caused by Katrina, citing, in particular the 9th Ward, “9th Ward” became, according to the *Times-Picayune*, “an international buzzword,” and volunteers expressed disappointment when they were not sent there. The “9th Ward” as it appears in national media, in scholarly works, and in public discourses does not encompass the actual geographic area that is administratively the 9th Ward of New Orleans. Neither does it correspond to a planning district or to a neighborhood. It has come to represent all New Orleans neighborhoods after the flood, a phenomenon that was detrimental to the people of New Orleans.

For example, Pontchartrain Park, in the Gentilly neighborhood, like the 9th Ward, was 97 percent African American before the flood. Before Katrina, less than 10 percent of the population of the 9th Ward was living under the poverty level, but the entire neighborhood flooded, and once the flood waters receded, more than 81 percent of the homes in this neighborhood were uninhabitable. Because of New Orleans’ complex racial history, a large population of middle-class and upper middle-class African Americans lived in Gentilly, Broadmoor, and New Orleans East, well outside the geographic boundaries of the 9th Ward. This could be the one category of population that was the most affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Paradoxically, the disproportionate investment of public attention on the 9th Ward to the exclusion of all other neighborhood volunteers hindered our recovery. The truth is that approximately half of the neighborhoods that flooded were racially mixed and populated by middle-class and upper middle-class people. Many of those living in the suburbs of Gentilly and New Orleans East moved there after World War II and are now elderly and living on fixed incomes.

Widely Shared View

This selective but distorted representation of New Orleans in the country’s collective consciousness bred frustration in the neighborhoods that received less national attention, aggravating the breaches that already existed within the city’s diverse population and thus endangering the sustainability and recovery of the entire city as a whole. The neighborhood leaders

of the diverse neighborhoods of the “9th Ward” I’m sure will agree that these depictions were often inaccurate and perhaps hindered their recovery as well.

As we rebuilt in these areas under the radar of some public awareness and often without the help of the many nonprofits that “flooded” New Orleans after the storm, we took our situation as an opportunity to develop new strategies to mobilize our best asset in the recovery: the citizens of our neighborhoods themselves.

The relief provided by the dozens of nonprofits that descended on New Orleans neighborhoods was temporary and therefore unsustainable. Many of the nonprofits seemed to be unaware of the civic organizations that existed before they arrived, and so their actions and strategies were rarely embedded in the civic structures of the neighborhoods where they worked. Also, the visions these nonprofits developed for the neighborhoods where they worked rarely coincided with the visions the neighborhood residents held. The result was often confusion and frustration. Furthermore, competition for funding and attention made collaboration between the dozens of nonprofits present in these neighborhoods almost impossible. The fading national attention on New Orleans and the economic crisis that followed Katrina rendered the fate of these resources even more uncertain. The nonprofits’ “fix-it” approach unsupported by in-depth knowledge about how local leaders can organize and empower their own community was effective in treating the symptoms of our neighborhoods’ decay, but it did not heal the community or promote sustainability. It created dependency rather than self-sufficiency in these neighborhoods. More important, it portrayed New Orleans’s residents as victims and failed to acknowledge the formidable effort of its citizens to engage in and improve their community. In contrast, the Beacon of Hope MODEL worked, and it was sustainable.

The Beacon of Hope MODEL made us stronger as individuals and as community partners, and it united us in our common goals. One should never underestimate the power of the people, the tenacity of the human spirit for its survival.

Conclusion

The Beacon of Hope MODEL empowered residents all over the city, helping them learn new skills and develop strategies to tackle issues that had existed before the storm but were worsened by it. Many of these residents have become leaders and public servants in city government. One is on the city council and another is now our mayor.

As we shifted from a recovery mindset to one focused on addressing typical urban issues of neighborhood revitalization and sustainability, we insured our future by engaging people and empowering them to become self-sufficient and take ownership of their circumstances so that our neighborhoods will still be viable when national attention wanes, recovery funds are depleted, nonprofits lose interest, and our volunteer base ceases.

Since its inception, Beacon of Hope has hosted more than thirty-five thousand visiting volunteers, representing more \$3.1 million in services rendered, completed more than twenty-three hundred homeowner projects, replanted twenty square miles of green space, restored eight parks and playgrounds, and created a monthly outdoor festival that continues to this day.

Wise words by Margaret Mead helped define our mission and inspired us every day: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.” Beacon of Hope served a dual purpose. We created a symbiotic relationship between homeowners and volunteers to assist homeowners in their recovery and to provide a meaningful experience for the volunteers.

As neighborhoods became self-reliant, the Beacon of Hope teams formed new homeowners associations in the areas that had previously had none. The Beacon of Hope MODEL still exists but is now being implemented by the homeowners associations. Currently, we consult with neighborhood leaders and government officials who are in need of a proven model for recovery.

It is my hope that this article offers a blueprint for neighborhood organizations recovering from natural disasters.