



Together New Orleans organizers Kahlida Lloyd (left) and Lakenya Roberson (right) at Central Missionary Baptist Church in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, prepare community members to canvas neighborhoods in nearby Arabi, Louisiana that sustained damage after a recent tornado.

Power to the People— Together New Orleans Provides Refuge from Disasters

BY BETH GRIFFIN

In southern Louisiana, a common thread running through the decades is the region’s almost guaranteed loss of electrical power in the aftermath of natural and manmade disasters. Without electricity, individuals and families lose access to heating, cooling, device charging, communication, information, refrigeration, and sometimes food purchase and preparation. Outages can drag on for weeks, endangering the health and livelihoods of entire neighborhoods.

Together New Orleans (TNO)—an organizing coalition of religious congregations, civic institutions, unions, and other community groups—has joined forces with government, commercial, and philanthropic entities to create neighborhood resilience centers known as Community Lighthouses. TNO receives grant support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

Community Lighthouses will be located at churches or community centers and will use commercial-scale solar panels and backup batteries to generate and store electricity for emergencies. Broderick Bagert, TNO’s Lead Organizer, says the batteries range from small installations that generate 60 kilowatt hours to commercial scale configurations with a capacity of 900 kilowatt hours.

“The idea is to provide a network of resiliency hubs around the city, ideally within a 15-minute walk for all residents,” says Broderick. “Community Lighthouses will allow churches to become a beacon of light and offer hot meals, cooling stations, and a safe spot to charge phones.”

The Community Lighthouse initiative is part of TNO’s work toward electricity reform, says TNO organizer Abel Thompson. “It introduces renewable energy to communities and will ultimately bring some lighthouse locations to ‘net zero’ energy use,” he says.

TNO has a goal to establish 85 to 100 Community Lighthouses in southeastern Louisiana. To date, ten sites have been identified for the pilot stage of the project, estimated to cost \$4.6 million. The construction will be funded through a combination of public, private, and philanthropic dollars. Among the government sources is the U.S. Department of Energy, which included the Community Lighthouse initiative as one of only 14 projects in the country to receive technical assistance from the department.

Broderick says the Community Lighthouse project is “a really good fit with the

➔ Continued on page 3



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Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$400 million to nearly 12,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Creative problem-solving is a hallmark of the grassroots organizations we work with at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). I am always impressed and inspired by how our funded groups identify new solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Of course, it doesn't happen overnight!

Together New Orleans (TNO), featured in this *Helping People Help Themselves* issue, is a great example. The coalition was formed by religious, civic, and union groups as a way for members to act more effectively on their missions to do justice in the world. Such a lofty goal requires a deep foundation of trust, understanding, and communication.

The member organizations of TNO purposefully moved slowly for five years to learn each other's stories, listen to one another's dreams and frustrations, and build relationships in a community as diverse as New Orleans. With grant funding from CCHD, TNO began to take action on concrete issues affecting the lives of people from local community organizations and houses of worship, including Catholic parishes. The nonpartisan coalition is deliberate and thoughtful about crossing the lines of race, religion, neighborhood, and political affiliation.

Earlier this year, TNO launched the Community Lighthouse Project, an incredibly ambitious plan to build a network of resiliency hubs at 85 churches and community organizations across southern Louisiana. Each hub uses commercial-scale solar power and backup battery storage to serve as a central response area in the wake of a disaster.

Fr. Henry Davis, SSJ, who is actively involved in TNO, said it was logical for Catholic parishes to be Community Lighthouse hubs because churches are already beacons of light in their communities. How true!

In much the same way, CCHD is a beacon of light and hope for low-income and marginalized individuals. Our work embodies the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church. Everything we do underscores the dignity of each individual.

We work to break the cycle of poverty by helping people participate in decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities.

At the same time, we are passionate about our complementary mission to educate about poverty and its causes. We provide the Catholic faithful with specific opportunities to express our baptismal call and act as the Body of Christ.

CCHD is an essential part of the social mission of the Church in the United States and a unique and longstanding example of the Catholic community's broad commitment to assisting low-income people.

I am grateful for your prayers and support. You help maintain CCHD's critical role as a beacon for those who seek justice.

RALPH MCCLLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development

You can be part of CCHD's critical work by donating at Mass or through your parish's online giving platform. #iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts funds for CCHD. Visit: <https://usccb.igivecatholictogogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-campaign-for-human-development> to learn more.



➔ Continued from page 1

priorities outlined in the anticipated federal infrastructure bill, including resiliency, renewable energy, and community equity.”

“If we have something underway and not just in idea form, we can raise money independently to make it happen and position ourselves to attract a larger appropriation from the federal infrastructure bill. This helps us stay at the center of the issue, so our priorities to focus on poor communities and work with a local base will be at the center of the federal experience,” Broderick says.

Energy is expensive and creates a disproportionately high cost burden on low-income people, who tend to live in older homes, Broderick says. A compassionate response to the need can include both charity and justice.

It’s charitable, for example, to provide money for a person’s utility bill, but weatherizing a home is a longer-term justice solution. In addition, the initiative provides local employment opportunities for the men and women who weatherize by replacing windows and doors, sealing gaps, and installing insulation, Broderick explains.

Although public funding is available to subsidize weatherizing by homeowners, renters generally are not eligible. “Nobody cares about renters, because they don’t have a lot of money and have no political power. We want to overhaul the city’s approach to weatherization and utility assistance and organize a system to serve those who need it the most,” Broderick says. “Instead of providing financial assistance alone, we’d like to see an energy efficiency audit, fully paid weatherization, and subscriptions to community solar for anyone who cannot afford to pay their utility bills.”

Since 2016, TNO has developed and grown through a series of issue-oriented campaigns identified by member congregations to address economic and environmental justice and build trust across racial lines. TNO now has more



Mobile solar stations were deployed at several locations in Arabi to act as mobile battery exchange “libraries” for community members without power.

than 50 member organizations and congregations, including many Catholic parishes. “We spent the first five years building a deep foundation of organizations. We have been systematic in inviting groups and growing slowly,” Broderick says. He attributes the organization’s ability to establish solid internal and external trust and relationships to the “patience and seed money” of CCHD.

Fr. Henry Davis, SSJ, pastor of Corpus Christi-Epiphany Catholic Church in New Orleans, came to TNO through a TNO-organized rally that included other groups with overlapping memberships. “TNO is a

nice way for us to do social outreach to the community beyond our walls. It’s something new and fresh and lets us come together as a community to resolve issues for our city,” he says. “It’s another arm in our community to bring government and religious groups together to build for a better future.”

Fr. Henry says that people throughout the area have been invited to use the Corpus Christi-Epiphany parish community center for meetings and office space. He says it’s logical to situate Community Lighthouses at churches, “where people always come because they know the Church will listen and be respectful.”



Continued from page 3

The Community Lighthouse Project will equip religious and community institutions with commercial-grade solar panels and backup batteries to ensure that New Orleans residents have access to cooling stations, cell phone charging, and a hot meal following a disaster or power outage.



Together New Orleans mobilized over 75 community members to respond to the Arabi tornado, conduct needs assessments, and distribute supplies to the hardest-hit neighborhoods in Arabi, Louisiana.

“People must have their basic needs met, especially in a crisis. TNO has given us a forum to get info in a safe environment and provide resources,” he adds.

Abel says the TNO organizing model recalls a time when churches and congregations were the centers of their communities. TNO has worked closely to develop relationships with and among lay and ordained parish leaders, he says. These efforts have already borne fruit. “There is a clarity of value that projects can bring to the community as a whole,” Abel says.

A tremendous advantage develops when people are organized in advance to mobilize quickly and solve problems in an emergency, Broderick says. As an example, he says, TNO worked with Together Louisiana and state and medical institutions to vaccinate 2,251 people at 46 events in New Orleans through its Vaccine Equity Project. After the project ended, a devastating tornado struck the area in April 2022. One hundred TNO volunteers donned their Vaccine Equity Project jackets and fanned out from a parish that had been identified as a Community Lighthouse but was not yet equipped with solar panels and battery storage. They went door to door to 1,300 homes for two weeks, asking people what they needed and delivering food and supplies. They also set up a portable battery charger exchange and connected people to mental health services.

“This shows what you can do when you are prepared and already have in place leaders

and preestablished teams,” Broderick says. “This could create a national model of how to talk to people after a disaster.”

After Hurricane Ida in 2021, TNO volunteers conducted a needs survey of 4,000 people and followed up with 3,000 residents of the hardest-hit areas to provide immediate assistance, including debris removal and \$75,000 in gift cards.

During Hurricane Ida, Fr. Henry’s parish did not sustain direct damage but lost power to its air conditioning and dehumidification system. The resulting condensation damaged the walls, pooled on the floors, and allowed mold to grow. During remediation and repairs, the parish lost the use of a popular and flexible meeting space for the community.

Nonetheless, Fr. Henry says the parish still is working closely with other TNO members on the Community Lighthouse and other projects. “TNO is the vehicle that pulls us together to talk about issues and enter covenant relationships with churches outside our tradition. We see what we can do together in our neighborhood, and we are doing it respectfully and with prayer,” he says.

“TNO is very excited to have a partnership with CCHD,” Fr. Henry says. “CCHD’s focus is on respecting the dignity of each person, making sure they are treated fairly, and helping people do things for themselves.”

“TNO wants the community to work together and challenge politicians to do

the right thing. We don’t have to go to city government to ask for permission. We can do it for ourselves,” he says.

TNO has partnered with the Archdiocese of New Orleans to strengthen parish leadership teams to act on the social mission of the Church. A main focus of the training is to establish that a parish’s eucharistic mission and social mission are both integral to what it means to be the Body of Christ.

The organization is also working with the archdiocese to demonstrate the value of CCHD’s support of local groups and the opportunities it provides for Gospel-inspired solidarity with and among low-income people. TNO volunteers will speak at Masses in advance of November’s CCHD Collection to share their stories and invite others to join TNO projects and support the work of CCHD. ☛



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