# Focusing on vacant properties in New Orleans to enhance resilience after Hurricane Katrina

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## Overview

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the failures of the federal levees in 2005, there was widespread uncertainty about whether and how different neighborhoods in New Orleans would recover. Local governments' rebuilding plans sparked intense debate, and it was unclear how many displaced residents would return.[1] Amid this uncertainty, many residents came back to the city, determined to rebuild. Nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and newly established or reinvigorated neighborhood associations rallied to assist them.

Despite these efforts, rebuilding proved challenging. Recovery and rebuilding were uneven, and home vacancies and disinvestment intensified. Within a few years, New Orleans had among the highest rates of vacant and abandoned properties in the nation, posing serious safety hazards and threatening to undermine the city's fragile recovery. The scale of the city's destruction, however, also brought an influx of federal and philanthropic resources and sparked an urgency to tackle the city's vacancy and abandonment problems.


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The combined efforts of all these different organizations and government agencies helped make New Orleans a national leader in "fighting blight." This report examines efforts after Hurricane Katrina to repurpose vacant and abandoned properties, drawing on public documents, agency records, secondary sources, and key informant interviews. The report begins with a discussion of the impacts and opportunities associated with vacant and abandoned properties, as well as

some of the conditions that accelerated disinvestment in the aftermath of the devastating storm.

From there, the report examines the city's initiatives to combat systemic vacancies through improved code enforcement and targeted disposition and redevelopment. It then examines efforts to address the challenges surrounding heirs' properties to prevent future vacancies, and concludes by highlighting lessons learned and opportunities for future policy action, among them:

- Continue to enforce property codes to address vacancies, the abandonment of properties, and neighborhood disinvestment
- Create a supportive code-enforcement environment that encourages compliance rather than punishment
- Support code enforcement among low-income and elderly homeowners with targeted financial and technical assistance
- Integrate code enforcement with strategies to stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods in ways that align with the needs of long-time residents and help them shape and benefit from neighborhood revitalization
- Continue to help the heirs of properties and their families access recovery aid and insurance proceeds
- Push for statewide reforms, including Louisiana's Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act, to protect 175,000 families with unclear property titles, alongside federal legislation to make federal disaster recovery aid more accessible to heirs' property owners

Taking these suggested actions can help prevent the future displacement of residents and the abandonment of properties when the next natural disaster inevitably hits New Orleans. Such actions would preserve generational wealth and strengthen community resilience all the more.

## How vacant and abandoned properties impact community resilience

Vacant and abandoned properties are an issue of critical concern to communities across the United States. They can pose serious safety hazards, upend community well-being and health, and attract crime.[2] Vacant and abandoned properties also can deter future neighborhood investment and depress surrounding property values. As property values decline, so does the tax base, creating revenue challenges for local governments who must bear the costs of maintaining vacant and abandoned properties and remedying any nuisance conditions that arise.[3]

"Blight" is commonly used to describe this problem of widespread vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties. Yet, the term is highly problematic, despite its popularity. "Blight" is often used to describe entire neighborhoods without recognition of the people and cultures of those communities.[4] Local authorities have used determinations of blight to justify the destruction of low-income Black and Hispanic communities in the name of urban renewal and, more recently, to support ad hoc demolitions that accelerate the decline of neighborhoods instead of reversing it.[5]

Rather than regarding vacant and abandoned properties as problems that must be contained, a more transformative view considers them as assets that, if supported by appropriate action and resources, can help meet a community's social, economic, or environmental needs and build resilience.[6] Vacant properties can create opportunities for the development of affordable housing and projects that can adaptively and creatively convert vacant buildings into community spaces.

With community input, the transformation of vacant and abandoned properties can create a sense of ownership and neighborhood pride among residents. Local officials also can revitalize urban areas and enhance climate resilience by transforming vacant properties into green infrastructure to manage

stormwater and mitigate flooding, reduce exposure to extreme heat, or improve air quality.[7] By integrating parks, greenways, and stormwater management projects into vacant spaces, cities can create areas that benefit the environment and the community.

Investments in vacant properties are opportunities to improve neighborhood conditions. As investments or planned investments increase, a market signal may follow, indicating future investment opportunities. There is always the risk, even in distressed communities, that these shifts can fuel speculation that ultimately leads to various forms of displacement—physical, cultural, political, or otherwise.[8] Safeguards, including anti-displacement and inclusive housing strategies, along with community involvement and control, are essential to ensure that long-time residents can remain in their homes and benefit from revitalization efforts.

## Hurricane Katrina and the Road Home program accelerated vacancies and abandoned properties in New Orleans

Vacant and abandoned properties were not a new phenomenon in New Orleans. Well before Hurricane Katrina, the city had long struggled with systemic vacancies driven by population loss and a weak economy. The 2000 U.S. Census counted the city's population at 484,674, down 23 percent from a peak of 627,525 in 1960. As the population shrank, the city's footprint expanded into low-lying, previously undeveloped areas to the east and north, while vacancies soared in the city's historic neighborhoods. This expansion occurred alongside significant White flight from the city.

Despite significant efforts to address widespread vacancy starting in the 1990s, the vacancy rate nearly doubled from 6.3 percent in 1960 to 12.5 percent in 2000.[9] Five years later, Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding damaged more than 134,000 housing units in New Orleans, roughly 70 percent of all occupied housing units in the city.[10] While the damage was widespread, it varied wildly by neighborhood. Detailed analyses of the social composition of damaged areas indicate that Hurricane Katrina took a disproportionate toll on Black residents, renters, and poor and unemployed residents.[11]

In response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita,[12] the Louisiana state government launched the Road Home Program, an $8.8 billion federally-funded recovery and buyout program—the largest recovery program in the nation's history. This unprecedented investment fund, however, contributed to displacement, disinvestment, and abandonment in three unanticipated ways. First, the Road Home Program encountered significant administrative challenges, which resulted in lengthy wait times for applicants.[13] Many residents lacked the financial resources to begin rebuilding on their own and could not afford to wait. The delays forced them to abandon their homes and start over elsewhere.

Second, the Road Home Program's inequitable grant formula disadvantaged homeowners in lower-income neighborhoods.[14] Grants were calculated based on the value of the home or repair costs prior to Hurricane Katrina, whichever was lower. This resulted in less funding for homeowners in lower-valued neighborhoods, despite comparable rebuilding costs. Since income and property values track with race in New Orleans, shortfalls in rebuilding grants disproportionately hurt Black homeowners.[15] As a result, many could not afford to rebuild, increasing vacancies and abandoned buildings.

Third, many property owners were denied access to the Road Home Program or were discouraged from applying because they lacked clear titles to their homes. Before Hurricane Katrina, many homes in New Orleans were passed down through families for generations, often without any official paperwork or legal documents, leaving them in a state of legal limbo.[16] Without a clear title, owners cannot sell their property, use it as collateral for a loan, collect on insurance policies, or easily access federal or state

disaster aid for home repairs. In New Orleans, roughly 25,000 homeowners—13.5 percent of all Road Home applicants—were initially denied access to recovery aid because they lacked a clear title to their properties.[17]

Legal aid groups and nonprofit organizations helped some homeowners demonstrate ownership and ultimately access recovery and insurance funds. Tangled titles, however, remained a significant barrier to recovery. One attorney estimated that title disputes prevented up to $165 million in recovery funds from being claimed.[18] New Orleans homeowners with complex succession issues were overwhelmingly Black, with the most heirs' properties located in the ZIP Code that includes the Lower Ninth Ward—the downtown neighborhood astride the north shore of the Mississippi River where the federal levees failed—which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters.[19]

## Building capacity and taking action to tackle systemic vacancies

Whereas specific neighborhoods experienced disproportionate vacancy and abandonment problems before the storm, and some disproportionally afterward, such as in the Ninth Ward, problem properties permeated virtually all neighborhoods in New Orleans after the storm. In 2010, five years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had 47,738 vacant housing units.[20] With a vacancy rate of 25 percent, New Orleans was among the most blighted cities in the United States.

Immediately after the storm, the city found itself poorly positioned to address the scale of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties that loomed. The city had long faced structural, legal, and administrative challenges in fighting systemic vacancies. These included a fragmented and uncoordinated system of vacant property administration, legal hurdles in acquiring and disposing of vacant properties, and a lack of information on problem properties.[21]

The city also lacked a comprehensive, citywide redevelopment strategy for vacant land.[22] Despite several recovery planning processes, the city did not develop a citywide revitalization strategy that addressed either pre- or post-Katrina population losses or incorporated strategies to deal with vacant and abandoned land.[23] On top of these challenges, the city, unable to make payroll, laid off 3,000 public workers—roughly half of its workforce—within weeks of Hurricane Katrina's landfall.[24] Staff cuts forced many city agencies to scale back their operations, delaying essential recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Two actions would heavily influence the management of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties in Hurricane Katrina's wake and guide the city's recovery and rebuilding. First, in 2004, a year before Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana enacted legislation that enabled New Orleans and other jurisdictions to give super-priority status to remediation property liens.[25] Municipal and parish governments with this authority can use the fines from code enforcement violations as legal leverage to gain possession over problem properties even if there are no delinquent taxes.

The goal of super-priority status is not foreclosure, but to get the homeowner to comply with housing codes and remediate problem properties. This statute paved the way for the development of a data-driven code enforcement regime that would eventually result in the abatement or demolition of thousands of problem properties across New Orleans.

In a second key action, the state designated the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority as the entity to receive the more than 5,000 properties conveyed to the Louisiana Land Trust through the Road Home Program. With this designation, it became the city's de facto land bank and the organization's focus shifted from one-off blight expropriations to comprehensive, data-driven, neighborhood recovery efforts. The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority worked in tandem with the City of New Orleans on data-driven blight tracking and code enforcement, as well as targeted property dispossession and development. Let's examine these efforts briefly in turn.

## Data-driven blight tracking and code enforcement

In 2010, newly elected Mayor Mitch Landrieu prioritized blight reduction and set an ambitious goal to reduce blighted properties by 10,000 in four years.[26] With technical assistance from the Center for Community Progress and the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and input from public, private, and nonprofit partners, the Landrieu administration developed an aggressive, data-driven strategy to address vacant, abandoned and deteriorated properties. The strategy, which centered on code enforcement, code lien foreclosure sales, and reinvestment, sought to address many of the limitations the city faced in dealing with systemic vacancies.

The Landrieu administration improved coordination among city agencies, streamlined the process for remediating problem properties, and implemented systems to improve the quality, availability, and utility of data.[27] With these reforms the city moved away from a complaint-driven system to a more proactive and systematic approach to code enforcement. Monthly BlightSTAT meetings strengthened interagency communications and served as a platform for residents to provide input and voice concerns about the city's efforts.

To help finance this work, the Landrieu administration dedicated the entire Neighborhood Housing Improvement Fund, a fund approved by voters in 1991, to support neighborhood housing improvement and blight reduction, to code enforcement.[28] The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority played a key role in cross-agency collaboration and used BlightSTAT data to inform its redevelopment strategies.

The Landrieu administration exceeded its goal of reducing the number of blighted properties,[29] making the city a national model for blight reduction.[30] Strict code enforcement, however, can lead to abandonment and further destabilize neighborhoods, if homeowners lack the resources to pay fines and repair costs.[31] In New Orleans, residents and housing advocates raised concerns that code enforcement unfairly hurt lower-income communities. Financial pressures from code violations forced some homeowners to sell their properties at steep discounts to avoid foreclosures, leading to displacement and a loss of generational wealth.[32]

In response to these concerns, the New Orleans City Council in 2015 redirected some of the funding from the Neighborhood Housing Improvement Fund to help property owners correct potential code violations. In redirecting these funds, the council sought to foster neighborhood stability through remediation and rehabilitation rather than simply eliminating "unsafe and deteriorating conditions."[33] Several nonprofit organizations helped disadvantaged homeowners with repairs.[34]

## Targeted disposition and redevelopment

For decades leading up to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans neighborhoods faced significant disparities, with many experiencing declining populations and high levels of vacancies and abandonment.[35] Unequal access to recovery aid, combined with existing socioeconomic disparities, resulted in uneven recovery among neighborhoods.

Recognizing this, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority tailored its interventions to the specific needs and market conditions of each neighborhood. The authority utilized a Market Value Analysis developed by the Philadelphia-based Reinvestment Fund, and four of these analyses of New Orleans over 10 years, the most recent in December 2023.

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority has employed three main disposition strategies for properties in its portfolio:

- Auctions
- The Lot Next Door program
- Requests for Applications/Proposals

Auctions allow the public, including developers, to acquire property at the highest bid, provided

they commit to redeveloping the property within 18 months of the transfer. In strong market areas, auction-based property sales can quickly generate substantial revenue for local agencies. But in weaker markets, limited demand may lead to speculative ownership, neglect, and continued vacancy rather than meaningful reinvestment or redevelopment.[36] In selecting properties for auction, the redevelopment authority utilizes the Market Value Analysis alongside staff analysis of market conditions to identify those properties with a reasonable chance of being redeveloped in the near term, while avoiding speculative investment and market depreciation.[37]

The Lot Next Door program, established in 2007, enables property owners to purchase adjacent parcels at fair market value. Those earning 80 percent or less of area median income can receive a credit of up to $10,000 toward the purchase of adjacent lots if they agree to make specific property improvements. The program contributes to neighborhood stabilization and revitalization by encouraging responsible land stewardship and enabling homeowners to expand their property.[38]

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority also facilitates strategic and intentional property transfers through its Requests for Applications/Proposals development solicitation processes. Whether applications or proposals, the redevelopment authority targets clusters of properties in specific neighborhoods for development by experienced teams or for urban agriculture or stormwater management projects. Properties are usually sold at fair market value but can be offered at a discount to encourage the development of affordable housing. In distressed areas, sales managed through intentional transfers tend to be more effective than auctions in promoting community stability and meeting redevelopment goals.[39]

To align property sales with its redevelopment goals, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority often requires purchasers to complete construction within a specified timeframe. It enforces this requirement through a right of reversion in its sales agreement, which enables it to reclaim ownership of the property if the buyer fails to meet the terms of the sale. Without such safeguards, vacant properties risk falling back into disrepair, tax delinquency, or being sold by investors instead of being developed.[40]

## The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority's strategies in action

As of May 2025, the redevelopment authority has successfully sold more than 86 percent of its Louisiana Land Trust properties, leaving only 696 in its portfolio. The most common disposition strategy has been auctions, accounting for more than 37 percent of all transactions. The Lot Next Door program follows as the second-most utilized strategy, making up more than 30 percent of property sales. The third-most frequent method involves transferring properties to support affordable housing development through Requests for Applications/Proposals (see Table 1).

Table 1 also shows a smaller percentage of properties have been designated for neighborhood initiatives or alternative land uses, for which the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority has collaborated with community partners to repurpose vacant properties into green infrastructure, reducing flood risk, and creating green spaces. Currently, the redevelopment authority has lease agreements with 25 individuals for initiatives such as community gardens, urban agriculture, and parks under its Growing Green program.

A comparison of the disposition strategies used in the four neighborhoods with the largest number of Louisiana Land Trust properties illustrates how the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority has tailored its interventions to each neighborhood's needs and market conditions. All four neighborhoods experienced high levels of flooding but differed in their property characteristics prior to Hurricane Katrina and recovery trajectories afterward. The Lower Ninth Ward had the highest number of these properties in the city, 882, significantly exceeding the counts of the next three neighborhoods.

Before Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward was a close-knit African American community known for its high rates of homeownership despite facing relatively high poverty and vacancy rates. Since the storm, the population recovery has been weak, reaching just 36 percent of the 2000 level by the 2019–2023 period. Limited access to recovery and insurance funds due to unclear titles, insufficient grant payouts for those who could access them, and limited personal savings have prevented residents from returning and rebuilding.

Uncertainty and confusion about the future of the Lower Ninth Ward, stemming from decades of neglect by city officials, led many residents to believe that the government would not prioritize their community's rebuilding, further discouraging their return.[41] In contrast, the three other neighborhoods—Little Woods along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans East, Filmore immediately to southeast next to City Park in Gentilly, and Lakeview on the west side of City Park—had comparably low vacancy and poverty rates before Hurricane Katrina. Their population recovery far outpaced that of the Lower Ninth Ward and even the city's overall recovery.

In the Lower Ninth Ward, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority relied primarily on intentional transfers through Requests for Proposals for affordable housing development and the Lot Next Door program. It did not heavily utilize auctions due to limited market demand. In Lakeview, an almost exclusively White, middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood before the storm, well over half (57 percent) of properties were sold at auction. Another almost 40 percent were transferred to existing Lakeview homeowners through the Lot Next Door program, in many cases allowing property owners to build larger single-family homes.

A similar pattern is evident in Little Woods, a predominantly African American, middle-class neighborhood in New Orleans East. But in Little Woods, almost 12 percent of property transfers were for affordable housing development, compared to less than 1 percent in Lakeview. For Filmore, a middle-class, racially mixed neighborhood in the Gentilly district, the Lot Next Door program was the most common disposition strategy, with auctions and affordable housing development tied for second at just under 25 percent.

The large amount of affordable housing constructed in the Filmore neighborhood was made possible, in part, through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program administered by the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority. It and its

TABLE 1

## NORA LLT Inventory by Disposition Strategy

| Method of Disposition | Total | % of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Auction | 1,975 | 37.17 |
| Lot Next Door | 1,624 | 30.57 |
| Affordable Housing Development | 839 | 15.79 |
| Neighborhood Development | 75 | 1.41 |
| Alternative Land Use | 58 | 1.09 |
| Market Rate Housing Development | 16 | 0.30 |
| **Total LLT Properties Sold** | **4,587** | **86.34** |
| **LLT Properties still held by NORA** | **696** | **13.10** |
| Growing Green Program | 25 | 0.47 |
| **LLT PROPERTIES TOTAL** | **5,313** | **100.00** |

*Source: Compiled by author with data from NORA's Monthly Inventory Report, March 28, 2025.*

development partners constructed 463 affordable housing units with a $29.7 million neighborhood stabilization grant awarded in 2010. The grant targeted neighborhoods in the Lower Ninth Ward, Pontchartrain Park, Gentilly, Broadmoor, Central City, New Orleans East, and the Seventh Ward for development.[42] Fifty-eight homes were built in the Filmore neighborhood through this neighborhood stabilization grant.

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority has sold almost all of its properties in Little Woods, Filmore, and Lakeview, but only 63 percent in the Lower Ninth Ward. Of the remaining Louisiana Land Trust properties, nearly half are located there. These properties represent only a small fraction of the vacant parcels there. In 2023, there were more than 2,400 vacant residential lots in the Lower Ninth Ward—roughly 70 percent of all residential parcels in the neighborhood (see Table 2).

Local government entities are increasingly using data-driven tools and technologies, such as Market Value Analysis, to inform investment decisions and strategically target limited resources. Despite their increasing popularity, critics contend that these tools and technologies can depoliticize planning decisions (masking power dynamics and reducing public accountability), inappropriately align government spending with pure market-driven priorities, and deepen race- and class-based inequalities.[43] By prioritizing investment in areas with stronger market potential, neighborhoods that already lack resources may continue to decline.

This critique raises the question of what to do in weaker market neighborhoods. Tools such as the Market Value Analysis can help local officials understand the distinct dynamics of lower-demand neighborhoods and develop strategies to stabilize them and prevent further decline.[44] Even small-scale interventions can play a crucial role in neighborhood change. For instance, addressing just a few key properties through rehabilitation can have a stabilizing effect and position a community for future growth.[45] Moreover, even modest, targeted efforts can build local capacity and foster trust, laying the groundwork for broader action and transformation.

In determining where to encourage the development of affordable housing, the New Orleans Redevelopment

TABLE 2

## LLT Inventory and Disposition Strategy by Neighborhood

| | | | | | LLT Properties | | LLT Properties Sold | | Disposition Strategy (% of Total) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Poverty Rate % (2000) | Vacancy Rate % (2000) | % African American (2000) | 2019–23 pop. as % of 2000 pop. | Number | % of total | Number | % of Total | Aucion | Lot Next Door | Affordable Housing Dev. |
| Citywide | 27.9 | 12.5 | 66.7 | 77.6 | 5,313 | 100.0 | 4,587 | 86.3 | 37.2 | 30.6 | 15.8 |
| Lower Ninth Ward | 36.4 | 13.9 | 98.3 | 36.4 | 822 | 15.5 | 519 | 63.1 | 11.7 | 21.3 | 24.5 |
| Little Woods | 17.4 | 3.9 | 86.2 | 86.2 | 462 | 8.7 | 421 | 91.1 | 42.2 | 36.6 | 11.9 |
| Filmore | 11.6 | 4.5 | 56.9 | 84.8 | 346 | 6.5 | 329 | 95.1 | 24.9 | 32.4 | 24.9 |
| Lakeview | 4.9 | 5.8 | 0.7 | 96.3 | 339 | 6.4 | 330 | 97.3 | 57.2 | 39.5 | 0.3 |

*Source: Poverty rates, vacancy rates and % African American from The Data Center, Neighborhood Statistical Area Data Profiles, https://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/neighborhood-data/; LLT data compiled by author with data from NORA's Monthly Inventory Report, March 28, 2025.*

Authority had to strike a delicate balance between incentivizing development in high-cost, high-demand neighborhoods such as Lakeview, and using lucrative auction proceeds from property sales in strong market areas to support the development of a greater number of affordable housing units in lower-demand neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the redevelopment authority chose the latter strategy. Such interventions can stabilize the housing market in weaker market neighborhoods and encourage future investment.[46] The provision of affordable housing in more moderate or transitional neighborhoods helps guard against future gentrification and displacement. In the Lower Ninth Ward, it worked with developers to produce 201 units of affordable housing on Louisiana Land Trust parcels. Some of these units were in Community Land Trusts, which guarantees permanent affordability, ensuring the long-term stewardship of the land and empowering residents.

## Preventing future land loss and abandonment

Heirs' properties can pose significant challenges to communities.[47] The lack of clear titles makes maintenance and investment decisions difficult, increasing the likelihood that those properties will fall into disrepair, which can subsequently lead to vacancy and abandonment. The relationship between heirs' properties and increased rates of land losses, abandonment, and community decline is well documented,[48] but Hurricane Katrina further exposed how heirs' properties can accelerate land loss by hindering disaster recovery.

Twenty years on, the prevalence of vacant and abandoned parcels in neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward is a tangible reminder of the struggles many property owners faced in accessing the resources they needed to recover from the storm's extensive damages, which writ large led to the widespread displacement and disinvestment that followed. The legal uncertainties of vacant and abandoned heirs' properties make them difficult to acquire, transfer, or reuse, stalling revitalization efforts.

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, legal aid groups, pro bono legal assistance, and nonprofit organizations in Louisiana have made significant strides in addressing the challenges surrounding heirs' properties and preventing future instances of vacancy and abandonment. Louisiana Appleseed, a public interest law center, has been a leader on this front through its legislative advocacy and education about the impacts of clouded property titles.

Created in 2007, the organization began by advocating for the extension of Road Home applications and appeals deadlines for people with succession and title issues, and worked with volunteers and project partners to simplify and reduce the costs of clearing clouded titles.[49] By the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the organization had helped preserve homeownership by saving 740 homes across the city, with an estimated economic benefit of more than $10 million.[50]

The experience with heirs' properties in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina has helped other organizations respond to and prepare for future disasters. The Flood Proof Project, a collaborative effort involving Louisiana Appleseed along with Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, the LSU Law Successions and Title-Clearing Clinic, and other legal aid organizations, helped residents with title issues impacted by the 2016 Baton Rouge area floods access $8 million in recovery funding.[51] In 2019, Louisiana Appleseed and Southeast Louisiana Legal Services expanded their education and outreach efforts into Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes southwest of New Orleans through the Protect Your Property Program. The program aimed to educate residents of hazard-prone coastal communities to be proactive before the next disaster strikes.

Legal aid, pro bono, and nonprofit organizations also championed important legislative reforms. In 2009, Louisiana Appleseed successfully fought for the passage of legislation to adopt an "heirship affidavit," streamlining the process of clearing property titles and

making it more affordable.[52] This led to subsequent revisions to the small successions laws adopted in 2011, 2012, and 2017, enhancing access to heirship affidavits for low-income homeowners.[53]

Louisiana Appleseed and others have played a pivotal role in advocating for the adoption of the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act in Louisiana. This legislation is designed to provide a process for the estimated 175,000 heirs to properties in Louisiana to reach clear title.[54] If enacted, this law could help thousands of families avoid losing their land and access recovery aid in the event of another disaster, which would prevent future vacancy and abandonment. Louisiana is the only state in the Deep South that has not enacted legal reforms to protect heirs' property owners.[55]

Hurricane Katrina and subsequent storms also highlight the need for reforms in federal disaster aid to help property owners with complex inheritance issues. A first legislative proposal, the Housing Survivor of Major Disasters Act, introduced in 2019, seeks to simplify access to FEMA housing assistance for heirs' property owners. Another 2019 proposal, the Reforming Disaster Recovery Act, focuses on the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and provides clear guidelines on acceptable ownership forms and verification documentation. This guidance would eliminate the inconsistencies of state-specific reforms and clarify the process for applicants and local administrators.

## Conclusion

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has increased the capacity of city agencies and developed tools and systems to address systemic property vacancies. These efforts have been integrated into broader neighborhood recovery efforts. Significant progress also is evident in policymakers and community and legal organizations recognizing and addressing the challenges that heirs' properties pose in dealing with vacant and abandoned properties after a disaster.

But there is still more to be done. The lessons learned in New Orleans over the past 20 years provide important insights and highlight key areas for future action. Code enforcement is critical in addressing systemic vacancies, maintaining neighborhood stability, and promoting redevelopment. When developing new and improved code enforcement systems, local officials should seek to create a supportive code enforcement environment that encourages compliance rather than punishment.[56]

Above all, local officials need to acknowledge the challenges that code enforcement can place on low-income and elderly homeowners and provide support, through steps such as rehabilitation programs, low-interest loans, or technical assistance, to help them address code violations. Recent legislative actions in Louisiana seek to impose stricter penalties for code violations.

Louisiana legislators also have increased the maximum fines allowable for code enforcement violations,[57] while the city of New Orleans is seeking to pass a criminal blight ordinance that would impose jail time on property owners who fail to maintain their lands.[58] While harsh penalties may be necessary for the most negligent and malicious violators, in most cases, they are overly punitive. Officials need to maintain a focus on helping those who are willing but unable to comply.

What's more, code enforcement alone is insufficient to address the complex issues of systemic vacancies and neighborhood disinvestment. A holistic approach is needed that integrates code enforcement with strategies to stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods and transform them in ways that align with the needs and desires of communities.[59] Transformation means moving beyond the false choice of disinvestment or displacement by creating conditions that allow long-time residents to shape and benefit from neighborhood revitalization. In the most distressed neighborhoods, intervention is necessary, even if on a small scale, to provide tangible benefits for

residents, build capacity and trust, and support future improvements.

Hurricane Katrina exposed how, after a disaster, the instability of heirs' properties can put residents at greater risk of displacement and accelerate disinvestment and abandonment, ultimately slowing recovery efforts. Legal aid and nonprofit organizations have raised awareness of these issues, helped families who live in heirs' properties access recovery aid and insurance proceeds, and pushed for statewide and federal reforms. But continued outreach and support are necessary to educate homeowners about the importance of estate planning and provide legal assistance to help clear titles to their properties. Support also should include continued advocacy to encourage local leaders to endorse Louisiana's Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act, which would protect 175,000 families with unclear property titles.

Local and state officials also should make assistance programs available to people living in heirs' properties. These programs could include grants or loans for home repairs, property tax relief, hazard-mitigation assistance, and disaster relief. Support also is needed for legislation aimed at making federal disaster recovery aid more accessible to heirs' property owners. These suggested actions do not address the losses experienced by heirs' property owners who were unable to return to New Orleans and rebuild, but they can help prevent future displacement and abandonment, preserve generational wealth, and strengthen community resilience.

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## About The Data Center

The Data Center, a project of Nonprofit Knowledge Works, is the most trusted resource for data about Southeast Louisiana. Founded in 1997, we provide fully independent research and analysis to offer a comprehensive look at issues that matter most to our region. With a mission of democratizing data, The Data Center has, and continues to be, an objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

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*The New Orleans Index at Twenty* collection includes contributions from The Data Center, the Brookings Institution, and a dozen local scholars. The aim of this collection is to advance discussion and action among residents and leaders in greater New Orleans and maximize opportunities provided by the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

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