

YWTF DC METRO PRESS RELEASE

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Sister Cities

With similar cultural histories, demographics and neglected infrastructures, Washington, DC and New Orleans are mirror images of each other. This is especially alarming in light of the calamity in New Orleans and recent reports that our nation's capital lacks a comprehensive emergency response plan — more than four years after the September 11 attacks. A major terrorist strike would pummel our community into chaos, and we would see frighteningly similar images to those of New Orleans in the last few weeks. As young women seeking to make change, we call attention to the parallels between the two cities in order to prevent a magnified disaster here in our community.

With over 60% of the populations being African-American — many of whom have lived in their communities for generations — both cities have thriving black cultural centers, and both draw significant numbers of cultural tourists every year. At the same time, both cities have crumbling infrastructure for those who are not tourists, dilapidated public housing and failing school systems. According to the literacy Information Communications Systems, both cities have a population in which almost 40% are not functionally literate. Both are notorious for high crime rates — in 2003 the FBI recorded 248 murders and 273 rapes in DC, while in New Orleans they reported 274 murders and 213 rapes, both nearly ten times the national average.

Considering these similarities, Hurricane Katrina has important lessons to teach Washington. It is clear from the crime and official neglect of much of New Orleans that a tragedy was already occurring there; Katrina magnified this tragedy and brought it to the world's attention. Our city must learn from the dreadful lesson of Katrina: combining economic, skin color and gender oppression with government neglect and a natural disaster will result in a catastrophe of disastrous proportions.

The second lesson we can learn is that before the storm hits, we must listen to those who most profoundly and acutely experience the daily reality of the tragedies occurring in cities across the US — a group that disproportionately includes young women like us. We are often the first to speak out when our communities are drowning. We are often the first to stand up for the survivors of rapes that go uninvestigated because there is no way to report them and to denounce the rising violence in the wake of a crisis, especially violence against women.

Our claims are repeated in the words of Merni Carter, executive director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, who told Women's eNews, “Sadly, domestic violence and child victimization are social problems that do not stop during this natural disaster.”

We write first as community members who have been active in the local humanitarian response to Katrina Hurricane evacuees — a number us helped set up the DC Armory for those who made it to our city. We write also as young women organizers who seek to raise awareness to improve our DC community before we are faced with a similar tragedy.

The deplorable conditions of our community — the nation's capital — must be addressed. Our civic leaders must develop and test a comprehensive emergency response plan and invest public funds into long term programs that provide housing, health care, and education for DC residents. These initiatives must be accountable to DC community members, especially those living at the intersections of oppression based on class, race and gender.

We must learn from our sister city, and not close our eyes to the realities of our community. We must not continue to neglect the 21% of our community members living in poverty — who are predominantly people of color, and a majority black and female — until a tragedy brings the secrets of capital city to the world's attention. Then, we will be forced to not only deal with them, but also with preventable environmental damage, violence, illness, rape, death and murder.

The good news is that many people are committed to bettering our community and proactively addressing the root causes of the disparities. We recognize the lessons of Hurricane Katrina. We need to ensure adequate resources are provided, so we can make the necessary changes and improvements *now*. We are working to solve our city's problems, so that we will survive the storms ahead.

Deva Kyle and Aisha Taylor serve on the Board of Younger Women's Task Force DC Metro Chapter, whose mission is to transform policy and culture to create a welcoming, safe, and inclusive community and future for all of the young women who live and work in the Metro area.