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ALABAMA APPLESEED SET TO RELEASE COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON HURRICANE KATRINA EVACUEES

Montgomery/Birmingham – The Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice and the Appleseed network will release on Monday, August 14 at 10 A.M. the first comprehensive report on the status of the more than one million Katrina evacuees. The report reveals that local non-profit and government agencies responded more quickly to assist evacuees than federal and national organizations. The study also identifies continuing areas of dire need for evacuees, including long-term housing and mental health care.

The study by Appleseed, a nonprofit network of public interest law centers, reports that in the largest mass movement of U.S. citizens since the Dust Bowl, local nonprofit organizations and state and local agencies were quick to respond to the needs of the Katrina evacuees, only 40% of whom have returned to their homes in New Orleans. Federal agencies and national non-profit organizations, while able to provide massive financial aid and supplies, were often constrained by cumbersome eligibility and application requirements, and therefore unable to act quickly. Federal response worked best when eligibility and application requirements were temporarily relaxed, allowing evacuees to carry their benefits across state lines.

The report, “A Continuing Storm: The On-going Struggles of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees – A Review of Needs, Best Practices, and Recommendations,” was conducted by Appleseed with pro bono assistance from seven national law firms. In addition to analyzing current conditions in New Orleans, the firms fielded 135 volunteer attorneys to study how host cities cared for 700,000 hurricane survivors in **Birmingham**, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Houston and San Antonio.

The goal of the project was to understand each city’s experience and to recommend best practices for future relief efforts. The report details a variety of interdependent issues in five key areas: housing, healthcare, education, employment and legal services.

“Unlike previous hurricanes or disasters our country has faced, Hurricane Katrina evacuees were unable to return home within a few days of the storm,” said Linda Singer, executive director, Appleseed. “Public and private agencies were faced with a relief effort for which they were generally unprepared. Clearly, there are challenges that must be addressed by these host cities, and by any city that is committed to the safety and security of its residents.”

The greatest challenge facing these host cities today is addressing the long-term needs of evacuees. Many still require housing, healthcare, including mental health services and employment. John Pickens, Alabama Appleseed's Executive Director, said: "The biggest challenge now, for Alabama Appleseed and all Alabamians, is to not let up doing the hard work required. The storm was a year ago, but we never know when the next catastrophe will hit. We all must recommit ourselves to rebuild our Gulf Coast, find good housing and healthcare for those still in need and respond with sufficient public and private funds so that Alabama and all its people will emerge stronger and smarter."

"The gridlock in decision-making surrounding the rebuilding of New Orleans has placed additional pressure on host cities and created a need for longer term evacuee assistance," said Singer. "Rebuilding New Orleans is critical for the entire region, as would be the rebuilding of any city to the region that surrounds it."

In addition to analyzing the challenges facing host cities, the report recommends action applicable to future disaster relief efforts. Among them: cities must have an organized action plan. Local response worked best when one designated agency coordinated efforts and each organization had a predefined role within its area of expertise. Those cities that centralized communications, volunteer management and social service systems with one clear leader were able to serve evacuees' needs more quickly. Finally, the availability of secure medical, education, housing and benefits records in a central digital database would allow evacuees to access services more quickly.

"Hurricane Katrina taught us that all cities must be prepared to face the human impact of a disaster in their region," said David Gross, a partner at coordinating law firm Faegre & Benson. "Whether we face another hurricane, an act of terrorism or any other disaster, cities around the country must have strategic plans in place to care for short and long term evacuees that do not depend solely on federal and national organizations."

The participating firms were Faegre & Benson, which led the research effort; Jones Day; King & Spalding; Kilpatrick Stockton; Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe, Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison, and Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton . The report was created from more than 350 interviews conducted from June 5 - June 23, 2006.

An executive summary of the report is enclosed (below). The full report is available at www.appleseeds.net.

Appleseed, a non-partisan and non-profit organization, is a network of public interest law centers working to identify and address injustices in their communities. As one of the nation's largest legal pro bono networks, Appleseed Centers work both independently and collectively, bringing their own experiences to create local solutions that are nationally relevant. We connect the top private practice lawyers, corporate counsel, law schools, civic leaders, and other professionals to tackle problems locally, at their root cause. For more information, please visit www.appleseednetwork.org.

Executive Summary

The Appleseed study is the first comprehensive analysis of the status of the more than one million Americans who were driven from their homes by Hurricane Katrina- where they are, how the federal, state and local

governments and relief organizations responded to the crisis, and what lessons their performance provide for the future.

The evacuation of residents from Gulf Coast areas struck by Hurricane Katrina was the largest mass movement of people within the United States since the Dust Bowl. More than 1.5 million applied for FEMA assistance. Ten months after the storm, only one-quarter of the residents of flooded areas in New Orleans had returned to the city, and as of January 2006, more than half of the 1.2 million Katrina evacuees over the age 16 had not returned to their homes. The average evacuee has moved 3.5 times, in a diaspora stretching from Puerto Rico to Alaska.

Seven of the nation's top law firms fielded 135 volunteers to review the state of relief efforts in the five major metropolitan areas that accepted the most evacuees: Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Birmingham, Houston, New Orleans and San Antonio. These volunteers completed over 350 interviews and focus groups.

Principal findings and recommendations:

- **Local entities responded far more quickly than the federal government or national organizations.**

Host cities and local non-profits quickly understood what was needed to manage the disaster and responded without waiting for confirmed commitments of federal funding. Many of them are still waiting for federal reimbursement.

The federal government's response was overly bureaucratic and inflexible. Federal agencies were constrained by cumbersome eligibility and application requirements for aid, and federal staff and national organizations did not have the flexibility, training, or resources to meet demands on the ground.

At the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, the five largest Birmingham-area public schools enrolled 863 evacuee children. According to Alabama State School Superintendent Joseph B. Morton, "Those students came with no school textbooks, no permanent school records, in many cases, no clothes, and in almost all cases with more psychological and social needs than many of us can imagine."

- **The principal issues facing evacuees are long-term housing and mental health services.**

Many evacuees have had a very difficult time finding long-term housing. In some host cities, existing housing programs were inadequate prior to the arrival of the evacuees. Given the existing inadequate stock of affordable housing, there is a real risk of increased homelessness in the cities with large populations of evacuees.

Federal officials estimate that 500,000 people are in need of mental health services because of Hurricane Katrina. Some evacuees had pre-existing mental health issues that were left untreated in the weeks and months following the hurricane. Substantial numbers of additional evacuees have now developed mental health problems, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition, many of those who have been on the front-lines, working with evacuees over the last year, themselves face burn-out and mental health issues.

While the immediate focus on short-term needs is appropriate, long term implications and problems must also be addressed and identified as early as possible.

Cities understandably focused their efforts on the immediate needs of crisis management. This mindset was compounded by the nature of many federal disaster programs, which only run for three or six months. Most evacuees can't recover in such a short time frame.

The federal government must rethink its disaster relief policies in a way that takes account of long term needs. Some cities have begun planning for long-term integration strategies, but that process has been slow. The anticipated expiration of remaining federal aid programs will create new strains and risks for evacuees who are

still not on their feet. There are many conflicting views, significant funding issues, and still no guidance on key policy issues in the reconstruction.

- **Many organizations, governmental and non-governmental, lack the information technology necessary for effective disaster management.**

The host cities have had great difficulty accessing school, medical, housing, and benefit eligibility records, among others. There was no central database for identifying and following evacuees, and often the organizations directly serving evacuees could not find the people they were supposed to be helping. A **national database** to track basic information of residents during times of crisis should be developed and implemented before the next disaster strikes.

- **The key to effective disaster management is a coordinated plan.**

The critical lesson of Katrina is that Americans need to have a plan, drill the plan, and follow the plan. Every major city in America should ask the question: What would happen if hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens, including those in the greatest of need, were to arrive at our doorstep tomorrow, in need of immediate assistance?

Appleseed is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building a just society. We strive for a society in which opportunities are genuine, access to the law is universal and equal, and power is used to advance the public interest. We believe the best way to achieve big results is to work for the kind of change that levels the playing field and transforms entire communities at a time.

Founded in 1999, Alabama Appleseed is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that identifies significant needs in the state, tackles their root causes, and crafts practical, lasting solutions through legal advocacy, community involvement, and policy expertise.