

Memorandum

To: U.S. Programs Board
From: Ann Beeson¹
Date: November 23, 2009
Re: A History of OSI's Grantmaking in New Orleans

This memo provides an overview of the history of U.S. Programs' grantmaking and engagement in New Orleans, Louisiana to help set the stage for our December Board meeting. New Orleans has a unique history that continues to capture the American imagination. Long before Hurricane Katrina hit and the levees broke, the city was a microcosm of all of the forces that continue to threaten open society in America, particularly in the deep South: entrenched racism, government corruption, weak infrastructure, and a history of harsh punishment that is a direct legacy of slavery.²

OSI's U.S. Programs grantmaking in the region began about ten years ago to support efforts to reform Louisiana's brutal criminal justice system. After Hurricane Katrina, we engaged in rapid response grantmaking to support groups working to ensure equity in the recovery, and launched a fellowship program to document the historical inequities exposed by the storm and to raise awareness about how these forces play out elsewhere in the country. During the restructuring of U.S. Programs in late 2007, staff began to explore the potential for more place-based grantmaking to complement our national work and to build on the success of the OSI-Baltimore model. New Orleans emerged as a promising choice. Research and planning with grantees and partners on the ground revealed two primary areas for additional investment with strong links to our ongoing work on criminal justice and equity in the recovery – government transparency and accountability, and support for art and cultural institutions that play a critical role in advancing social change in New Orleans.

Currently, several of our funds are engaged in grantmaking in the city, and are working collaboratively to empower New Orleanians to rebuild a better city. The Criminal Justice Fund continues to support advocacy, legal services, public/private coalitions, and fellowships aimed at reforming the criminal justice system. The Strategic Opportunities Fund shaped our rapid response grantmaking post-Katrina, developed the Katrina media fellowships, and currently supports art and cultural institutions and other place-based initiatives. The Transparency and Integrity Fund (in partnership with the Strategic Opportunities Fund) is building the capacity of organizations working to increase governmental transparency. Most recently, the Campaign for Black Male Achievement has begun to identify strategies to advance positive outcomes for black males in New Orleans.

¹ I am deeply grateful to Erlin Ibreck, Tom Hilbink, and Lenny Noisette for their contributions to this memo.

² We have provided a few additional articles in the Board book, following this memo in Tab 3, about the history of social justice in the region.

The open society challenges and opportunities in New Orleans, as elsewhere, are deeply linked. Corruption plagues the criminal justice system. The massive over-incarceration of people of color in New Orleans perpetuates racial inequality. The city's historical lack of investment in public infrastructure is evident everywhere – in the failure to protect citizens after Hurricane Katrina, in the lack of government support for local culture that draws tourists from around the world, and in the crumbling criminal justice system. By advocating for more transparent information about government spending and decisionmaking, citizens will be able to actively engage and influence the redevelopment process. By partnering with a small but growing number of reform-minded government officials, a diverse group of local grassroots, policy and legal groups are slowly reforming the criminal justice system. And by drawing on the city's unique history and culture, New Orleans culture bearers are mobilizing people to solve the housing crisis, reform the criminal justice system, and offer young people an alternative to violence.

1997 – 2005: U.S. Programs Launches Criminal Justice Reform Efforts

OSI began its support of criminal justice reform in New Orleans nearly a decade ago with funding to the **Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL)**,³ an advocacy organization formed in response to the growing number of youth incarcerated in Louisiana and the brutal conditions of juvenile prisons. Since that time, we have made grants to a number of local grassroots advocacy organizations and provided funding to help sustain efforts to build viable adult and juvenile public defender offices. Our investments have included a number of Soros Justice Fellows, and support for national grantees to work in New Orleans. We have also supported advocacy for statewide reform of Louisiana's indigent defense system.

Building a Movement

With OSI support, the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana has become a leader of reform efforts in Louisiana. It spearheaded the campaign to drive all for-profit juvenile prisons out of the state, closed two prisons (the notorious Jena and Tallulah facilities), and helped to build public will for the passage of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003. The Act changed Louisiana's policy away from expensive and harmful incarceration toward community based alternatives. Since JJPL opened its doors in 1997, the juvenile prison population has dropped from almost 2000 to approximately 500.

JJPL has also served as an incubator for other reform efforts. It helped to launch new non-profits dedicated to serving youth, their families and justice; many of them are now also OSI grantees. One organization, **Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)**,⁴ grew out of JJPL's work to close the Tallulah youth detention center. During the campaign, parents and grandparents of children suffering in Louisiana's youth prisons began to call the JJPL office with ideas and energy to take the

³ Dana Kaplan, the current executive director of JJPL, is a former Soros Justice Fellow. She will moderate the criminal justice panel during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

⁴ Gina Womack of FFLIC will participate in the criminal justice panel during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

struggle to another level. FFLIC made their public debut in September of 2001 when they organized the "Mock Jazz Funeral," a march that adapted a New Orleans tradition to mourn the lost freedom and departing dreams of their children. More than 150 people marched, and brass bands played while chanting parents and children led the way to Orleans Parish Juvenile Court. FFLIC was born and became a critical player in the successful "Close Tallulah Now!" campaign. We have supported FFLIC as it has secured other hard fought reforms, including the creation of a firewall between the Office of Youth Services (formally Office of Youth Development) and the adult Department of Corrections. It now has five chapters throughout Louisiana, and is broadly engaged in criminal justice reform efforts in New Orleans.

Seeding Leadership

The Soros Justice Fellowship has been a key part of our effort to build capacity and leadership for criminal justice reform in New Orleans. Our first fellowship, in 2003, went to **Grace Bankole**, to organize parents of incarcerated children and train them to be Parent Advocates who serve as statewide resources for other families involved in the justice system. In 2004, we awarded a fellowship to **Norris Henderson**,⁵ a respected community activist who was formerly incarcerated, to conduct public education and to organize formerly incarcerated people and their families and neighbors for systemic criminal justice reform in New Orleans. During his fellowship, Henderson exposed perilous conditions in the Orleans Parish Prison, played a leading role in efforts to create the New Orleans Office of the Independent Monitor to provide oversight of police policy and practice, and developed and mobilized a stable network of dozens of community members to demand accountability on criminal justice issues from local officials. We have since awarded other fellowships for a range of advocacy projects.

2005 – 2007: U.S. Programs Responds to Hurricane Katrina

The devastation caused by the failure of the levees after Hurricane Katrina revealed the consequences of underinvestment in infrastructure and social welfare in New Orleans, and exposed to the world the persistence of inequality in the Gulf Region and around the nation. The humanitarian crisis offered a compelling opportunity for OSI to help shape the rebuilding of a more just and equitable society in New Orleans and to develop best practices and replicable models that might benefit other communities.

Rapid Response Grants and the Katrina Media Fellowship

With the Board's encouragement in 2005, U.S. Programs shaped a response to the crisis that leveraged our strengths, expertise and resources. Led by the Strategic Opportunities Fund, our first round of grants provided additional capacity to existing grantees whose work on behalf of the most marginalized communities had been disrupted by the storm. We also provided support for grassroots outreach to ensure that the voices of low income people of color, women and immigrants were heard during the recovery process. Intermediary organizations like the **Ms. Foundation**, **Southern Partners Fund** and the

⁵ Norris Henderson and Rosana Cruz, of Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE), will guide and provide commentary for the bus tour of New Orleans during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

21st Century Foundation (now a grantee of the Campaign for Black Male Achievement) provided small grants as well as financial and technical assistance. National groups like the **Catholic Legal Immigration Network** and the **Center for Social Inclusion** (current grantees of the Equality and Opportunity Fund) offered direct services and partnered with grantees on recovery-related advocacy. U.S. Programs also began supporting the efforts of the **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' State Fiscal Analysis Initiative** in Louisiana and the **Louisiana Association of Non-Profit Organizations** to provide reliable budget and tax analysis and to advocate for transparency and equity in the post-Katrina recovery spending. (They continue this work with support from the Democracy and Power Fund.)

The Strategic Opportunities Fund also worked collaboratively with the Soros Justice Fellowship and the Documentary Photography Fund to create the **Katrina Media Fellowship**, a one time fellowship to support ongoing media coverage and public discourse about the region's rebuilding challenges. A total of 32 fellowships were awarded to support journalists, documentary filmmakers, and youth media organizations to generate and improve media coverage of issues exposed by Katrina and to stimulate a national conversation. A full list of the Katrina Media Fellows is attached. The fellows included **Lolis Eric Elie⁶** and **Dawn Logsdon**, who created a feature-length documentary, *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, which focuses on the historic neighborhood that, during slavery, was home to one of the oldest, most prosperous, and most politically active black communities in the country. The film describes social, cultural, and political activities among free blacks in the early 1800s, and examines the impact of Katrina on the neighborhood's future.

Katy Reckdahl⁷ covered the working poor in New Orleans, their struggles to return to the city after Katrina, and the hurdles they faced once they arrived home. She paid particular attention to the Tremé neighborhood, which before the storm was home to a rich African American culture and the meeting place for many jazz musicians. Reckdahl wrote long-form pieces about outsiders' perceptions of New Orleans, public housing, and the struggles of musicians, benevolent societies, and evacuees.

Tia Lessin, a journalist and filmmaker, created a feature-length documentary titled *Trouble the Water*, which tells the story of aspiring rap artist Kimberly Rivers Roberts and her husband Scott Roberts, who survive the storm and then seize a chance for a new beginning. The film combines harrowing footage recorded by Kimberly as she and her husband waited out the storm, with Lessin's documentation of their journey after leaving the Red Cross shelter. *Trouble the Water* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary, and won top prizes at the Sundance Film Festival and the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. The film is not just about a hurricane but about poverty in

⁶ Lolis Elie, a native New Orleanian and well-known expert on the history and culture of New Orleans, will co-host an evening of New Orleans culture during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

⁷ Katy Reckdahl, who is now a reporter at the New Orleans Times-Picayune, will interview George Soros and the Honorable Calvin Johnson (a retired judge), at an invitation-only forum with OSI grantees and other local leaders on December 1, 2009, in advance of the Board meeting.

America and government accountability and liability. Advocates across the country have used the film as an organizing tool to address issues of equity and justice.

John McQuaid, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and environmental and political correspondent, wrote about what he called “the first major U.S. casualty of global warming, focusing on what went wrong before Katrina and whether current reconstruction efforts were going in the right direction. He wrote a series of articles in *The Washington Post*, the Center for Public Integrity’s publication *City Adrift: New Orleans Before and After the Katrina*, and *What the Dutch Can Teach Us About Weathering the Next Katrina*, that helped to provide a more nuanced understanding of how government relaxation of standards and outsourcing of contracts led to the ultimate breakdown in the levee’s infrastructure.

Last week’s ruling of a federal district judge finding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers liable for failure to mitigate the damage its construction and operation of the MR-GO channel caused to the wetlands, and, ultimately to the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish on August 29, 2005, gives hope to many that government negligence is finally being acknowledged.

Criminal Justice in the Aftermath of the Storm – A Crisis Exposed

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina pushed a criminal justice system that was already in trouble to the brink of collapse. All components of the New Orleans criminal justice system — policing, detention, and courts — have been intensely criticized over the past 20 years for corruption, racism, brutality, and deep ineptitude. Yet the public debate over how to reconstruct a city with quality housing, parks, and schools did not include the question of how the public safety system should be reconstructed. U.S. Programs’ criminal justice staff joined with the Strategic Opportunities Fund to expand our efforts to address the post-storm crisis.

The Soros Justice Fellowship supported **Ursula Price’s** work to investigate Orleans Parish inmates’ horrific claims of neglect and abuse and to aid in reshaping the Orleans Parish justice system. Former Soros Justice Fellow Norris Henderson’s efforts laid the foundation for **Safe Streets/Strong Communities** (also incubated at the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana), which was created in the wake of the storm. We also provided a grant to **Cascade Center for Community Governance** to develop and implement the Louisiana Civic Justice Corps to engage currently and formerly incarcerated people in clean up and housing reconstruction efforts in New Orleans.

The national attention to the broken justice system exposed by the storm provided new momentum for reform, and we supported the efforts of a number of national grantees to work with local groups to develop solutions during this period. The **National Legal Aid and Defender Association**, the **NAACP Legal Defense Fund** and the **Brennan Center for Justice**, among others, worked to reform New Orleans’s disgraceful public defender system. While much still remains to be done, New Orleans now has a full-time, independent public defender office with appropriate facilities, investigators and social work staff – none of which existed before the storm. We continue to support the **Orleans**

Public Defender⁸ and **Juvenile Regional Services** (initially a project of JJPL) as they expand these critical services.

2007 – 2009: Expanding Support for Open Society in New Orleans

In 2007, as U.S. Programs began to expand our place-based philanthropy to complement our national funding strategies, we identified New Orleans as a locale that was ripe for additional funding that could advance OSI's goals on several fronts. After meeting with many grantees, local leaders, and other funders, the Strategic Opportunities Fund identified two new areas for cross-program grantmaking – government transparency and accountability, and support for art and cultural institutions that are advancing social change in New Orleans – to complement our long-term work on criminal justice and to build on our post-Katrina investments.

Transparency and Open Governance

During the process of researching potential new funding areas, local advocates and researchers repeatedly mentioned the need to strengthen government transparency and accountability as key to an effective recovery and to building a more open society in New Orleans. U.S. Programs had just launched the new Transparency and Integrity Fund (TIF), and so TIF and the Strategic Opportunities Fund began working together with local good government groups, community organizers, and data collection organizations to create the first-ever coalition devoted to tackling transparency and integrity of New Orleans government.

New Orleans has a storied history of government waste, fraud and abuse, along with unresponsive, unaccountable governance – a situation long accepted as inevitable by local residents. Since Hurricane Katrina, however, the city has experienced a rebirth of civic concern and engagement, fueled by the sense that even persistent problems require attention if the city is to recover and thrive. Advocates on issues ranging from education to criminal justice to municipal contracting and budgeting have found that their separate efforts are hampered by a common problem: lack of government transparency and openness. Basic data on city revenues and spending are not collected. A shadow government of nearly 300 independent commissions is unaccountable to residents. And existing open records laws are mired in a morass of inaction and ineptitude. With a dedication to reforming these opaque governing practices, a group of local organizations has come together over the past year to establish the **New Orleans Coalition on Open Governance (NOCOG)**.⁹

The Coalition brings together community organizations with good government and data collection organizations, an atypical combination that reflects the need to engage a multi-racial group of local residents in building the case and support for change. Working

⁸ Derwyn Bunton of the Orleans Public Defender will join the criminal justice panel during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

⁹ Members of the New Orleans Coalition on Open Governance, moderated by Co-Coordinator Linda Usdin, will join us during the Board meeting on December 3, 2009 for a discussion of transparency and accountability in New Orleans.

together are the **Neighborhood Partnership Network**, the **Committee for a Better New Orleans**, **Puentes**, the **Greater New Orleans Data Center**, the **Tulane-Loyola Public Law Center**, and the **Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana**. Also affiliated with NOCOG is the recently launched *New Orleans Lens*, an on-line investigative news source staffed by former journalists from the *Times-Picayune* and the *American Prospect*. The *Lens* will collaborate with the Coalition at a local level. National partners will include the **Center for Public Integrity** and its Investigative News Network, and the **Project on Government Oversight (POGO)**. POGO and the *Lens* (with input from the Revenue Watch Institute) are already collaborating on an investigation of extractive industries revenues and impacts in Louisiana.

Art, Culture and Social Change

New Orleans is known around the world as a cultural wellspring. The rich tapestry of African-American, Cajun and Creole traditions gave birth to a number of indigenous cultural forms. The most celebrated art form born in New Orleans is jazz, now known throughout the world as one of America's most significant native musical traditions. Other cultural forms unique to New Orleans include the Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs, which sponsor the famous "second line" parades. A "second line" is a street parade led by one or more brass bands, in which spectators are encouraged to form a second line behind the band and to follow the band through the streets in a spontaneous demonstration of celebration and solidarity. Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs grew out of "benevolent societies" formed among African-Americans in the mid-1800s to help members defray health care costs, funeral expenses, and financial hardships. These early societies fostered a sense of unity in the community, performed charitable works, and hosted social events.

The Mardi Gras Indians are another cultural institution unique to New Orleans, and first developed in the mid-19th Century as an affinity between African-American and Indian communities as minorities in the dominant culture. African-Americans continue the tradition today in homage to Native Americans who gave refuge to runaway slaves. Members of these "tribes" parade in elaborate handcrafted suits of feathers and beads. The lyric to one prominent Mardi Gras Indian anthem, "We won't bow down," is a widely used slogan that signifies their commitment to resistance.

In New Orleans, perhaps more than anywhere else in the United States, social justice continues to be expressed and advanced through cultural forms. Culture serves as both an organizing tool for positive change and a safety net in the face of adversity; networks formed by artists and participants serve as de facto community centers. Cultural activists have "second lined" to support Charity Hospital, the only remaining public hospital in the city; to demand alternatives to the over-incarceration of young people; and to protest the closing of public housing. While the power and appeal of native culture is routinely exploited by the city in the marketing of New Orleans, these cultural institutions receive virtually no support from city government or local philanthropy.

Last year, U.S. Programs began to make exploratory grants to local cultural institutions to support the critical role that culture plays in advancing social justice in New Orleans.

Our first grant was to the **Ashe Cultural Arts Center**,¹⁰ one of the most respected institutions working to combine neighborhood and economic development with the creative forces of community, culture and art to revive and reclaim a historically significant corridor in Central City New Orleans. Ashe is a producer and presenter of multi-disciplinary cultural art works throughout the New Orleans Diaspora. Ashe creates partnerships and collaborations that inform and guide the consciousness of community, public policymakers, and business leaders about local issues.

Another grantee, **SilenceIsViolence**, is a newer initiative that is galvanizing the community across race and class lines, and is bringing attention to issues of safety and crime prevention. The organization was founded following the murder of Dinerral Shavers, a beloved high school music teacher and leader of the Hot 8 Brass Band. The group leads anti-violence walks through the city, advocates for city leaders to take action, and runs music clinics for young people. SilenceIsViolence seeks to sustain pressure on the criminal justice system through a variety of accountability measures, collectively called VOICE (Violent Offender Intervention through Citizen Engagement), because of their founding concern with violent criminal cases, particularly murder cases and trials. Norris Henderson has been a crucial advisor to the effort.

Thousands of musicians and culture bearers in New Orleans lost their neighborhoods and their livelihoods in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing floods. **Sweet Home New Orleans**¹¹ was formed to address the crisis for artists who often lacked the personal resources to rebuild their houses and re-establish their lives in the post-Katrina local economy. Sweet Home's mission is to support the individuals and organizations that perpetuate New Orleans' unique musical and cultural traditions. The organization helps New Orleans' musicians, Mardi Gras Indians, and Social Aid & Pleasure Club members establish sustainable lives in their New Orleans neighborhoods and become an artistic force behind the city's revitalization. Sweet Home New Orleans has emerged from the aftermath of the flood as the leading local service provider to the city's cultural community.

Transforma Projects is a collective of artists and creative professionals formed after Hurricane Katrina to support, nurture, and celebrate creative practices that impact the social and physical environment of the city of New Orleans. The initiative explores how art-making can intersect with other sectors such as education, health, environment, and community development. Transforma seeks to expand opportunities for artists to use their creativity in rebuilding communities. In one project, conceptual artist Mel Chin worked with the Contemporary Arts Center, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and others to raise awareness about high levels of lead contamination and its devastating impact on school-age children. Another Transforma initiative was the Plessy Park Project, which brought together community members to acknowledge the New Orleans site on which Homer

¹⁰ Carol Bebel, executive director of Ashe, will co-host an evening of New Orleans culture during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

¹¹ Jordan Hirsch, executive director of Sweet Home New Orleans, has planned the music for the evening of New Orleans culture during the Board meeting on December 2, 2009.

Plessy was arrested on June 7, 1892 and to stage an event on the site that culminated in the installation of a memorial plaque.

Sustaining Criminal Justice Reform

In the criminal justice arena, we have continued to build the leadership of grassroots advocates and to work with local government leaders and civic groups to advance an ambitious agenda for reform. In 2007, we awarded **Safe Streets/Strong Communities** a grant to organize local residents and forge alliances with local and national organizations to create a criminal justice system in New Orleans that is fair, just, and accountable and that ensures neighborhood safety and well-being. Safe Streets has earned a reputation for being a highly effective force for progressive change in New Orleans and a model for local organizing efforts nationwide.

In the spring of 2007, local advocates, including many OSI grantees, invited the **Vera Institute of Justice** to lend its national expertise to their reform efforts. At the request of the New Orleans City Council, Vera proposed several initiatives to make the city's criminal justice system more fair and effective based on national good practices. Laura Kurgan and the **Spatial Information Design Lab** supported this reform work through a detailed analysis and visual mapping of incarceration in New Orleans Neighborhoods. The publication *Justice Re-Investment New Orleans*, included in your Board books at Tab 5, makes recommendations for specific investments in civil infrastructure to help end the cycle of incarceration. The Vera Institute then helped to facilitate a groundbreaking retreat of the city's criminal justice leaders, which led to the formation of the Criminal Justice Leadership Alliance (CJLA), and a Statement of Commitment to specific reforms. OSI's grant to Vera supports its work with local advocates, the CJLA, and New Orleans business and civic leaders, all of whom are now working to put these ideas for reform into practice.

In 2008, we awarded a Soros Justice Fellowship to **Joshua Perry** to work with the Orleans Public Defender to address systemic challenges such as excessive detention of defendants before they have been charged, the jailing of citizens simply due to their inability to pay fines, and the refusal of public agencies to provide requested public documents. Our newest grantee, **Voice Of The Ex-offender (VOTE)**, directed by Norris Henderson, will conduct public education and organize and mobilize people with criminal records around their right to vote. VOTE will complement and support the national struggle for federal re-enfranchisement and will work to increase the participation of marginalized communities in the 2010 Census.

2009 and Beyond: Our Future Grantmaking

U.S. Programs expects to continue grantmaking in New Orleans for at least another three years. The Criminal Justice Fund is optimistic about the possibility for significant reform through the new alliance of local and national advocates working with government officials. The Transparency and Integrity Fund has identified Louisiana as a target state for additional investments, and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement is identifying strategies to advance positive outcomes for black males in New Orleans. The Strategic

Opportunities Fund will continue to explore opportunities to support the role of art and culture in advancing social justice, and to recommend other grants that complement our existing work. We will continue to work directly with grantees and funding partners to deepen the impact of our grantmaking and to adjust our strategy as needed. We look forward to the Board's feedback about the work so far and your ideas about the next phase of our grantmaking in the region.