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EDITORIAL

Katrina's Most Vulnerable

Louisiana is set to receive \$73 million in desperately needed federal aid to help house some of the region's lowest-income families, including ill and disabled people left homeless by Hurricane Katrina.

Landing the money is only the first challenge. Now begins the delicate and difficult work of setting up permanent housing arrangements for homeless people, many of whom have psychiatric or medical problems that require ongoing counseling and other services.

Homeless-services agencies that work in New Orleans are rightly worried. In a city where rents have skyrocketed and housing is in short supply, they fear that developers who were required to set aside units for the most vulnerable citizens may shy away from tenants with histories of mental illness or homelessness.

Political leaders and policy makers will also have to muster courage and persistence in the face of pessimists, who will inevitably question whether people who were once homeless can be good neighbors and citizens.

The answer is that these projects can work, and work well, when people are given the help and guidance they need. One of the most successful models is found in New York City where Common Ground, a nonprofit agency, has created more than 2,000 units of permanent and transitional housing for the homeless since 1990.

The group's signature program near Times Square includes more than 650 apartments, half of which are occupied by formerly homeless people. Working with other nonprofits, the group provides counseling, job placement and other support to tenants.

The group has shown that people with psychiatric and other problems can better manage them once they are permanently housed and provided with services.

This success is even more impressive because Common Ground deliberately seeks out the most difficult cases, including people who have spent years on the street and cycling in and out of jail. Supportive housing costs substantially less than homeless shelters — and many times less than jail cells or hospital rooms.

The good news is that New Orleans can look to projects like Common Ground's. Political leaders need to understand that getting homeless people off the streets and into permanent housing is not only good for the homeless but essential for the health of the city.