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Katrina's aftermath lays bare the state's dirty secret: its ongoing failure to address the needs of its neediest citizens.

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BODY:

IF A GOVERNMENT'S primary responsibility is to protect its citizens, then the heartbreaking aftermath of Hurricane **Katrina** in New Orleans illustrates the utter abdication of that responsibility. Was the evacuation order for New Orleans issued in time? Sure -- but only for people with sufficient money in their pockets and a car in their garage.

It was no secret that there was going to be a problem. As early as 2002, the New Orleans Times-Picayune speculated about "the big one." The newspaper noted, "Once it's certain a major storm is about to hit, evacuation offers the best chance for survival. But for those who wait, getting out will become nearly impossible as the few routes out of town grow hopelessly clogged. And 100,000 people without transportation will be especially threatened."

In the years that followed, officials sought to anticipate a number of travel woes for residents with cars. It wasn't perfect, but thanks to smart traffic management, many hundreds of thousands of people were able to flee the area in advance of **Katrina**.

But the state never bothered to address the issue of the 100,000 people without cars -- among the poorest people in the state -- who were unable to leave no matter how badly they might have wanted to. The tragedy unfolding on television over the last few days has provided graphic testimony of that.

How could that have been allowed to happen? The Louisiana political machine in general, and the New Orleans political machine in particular, are famous for their ability to turn out the vote at election time. Legend has it that vans magically show up to transport voters to the polls and that meals or money can

just as magically appear as rewards for votes well cast. Where were those vans when it came time to flee the city? Where are the hot meals and cold drinks now?

THE ANSWER HAS to do with the Louisiana government's long-standing lack of interest in the state's neediest residents. By nearly every socioeconomic measure available, the gap between our "haves" and our "have-nots" is stark. A few examples: The state's indigent defender program is in desperate need of reform, but change is being blocked by powerful political players with a vested interest in maintaining the system as it is. The high school dropout rate -- already tied for worst in the nation -- is rising despite much-touted accountability efforts that still fail to keep kids in school. The per-capita prisoner incarceration rate is the highest in the country without the accompanying high rates of crime, recent events in New Orleans notwithstanding. Kids Count, the annual ranking of child well-being, ranks Louisiana 49th for its overall performance, and no wonder: Nearly 50% of the state's children live in poverty (as do 15% of its residents over 65). In New Orleans, the Census Bureau reported that 27.9% of the population lives in poverty -- more than double the national average.

In Louisiana's most recent legislative session, the state saw an influx of tax revenues from the oil industry, increasing the state budget by more than \$1 billion over the year before. But despite being flush with new money, somehow there wasn't enough to provide a much-needed salary increase for the state's public schoolteachers. Instead, state money went to legislators' pet projects, a nonsensical reservoir creation program and construction of a convention center hotel in the northwest corner of the state.

Clearly this was an indefensible allocation of resources given the importance of quality public education for any successful poverty reduction plan. Instead, Louisiana's plan for poverty has been limited to a series of so-called summits at which officials talk piously about the problem while doing nothing substantive.

Unfortunately, Louisiana's response to Katrina now appears to be coming from the same playbook.

For years, Louisiana has failed to address the needs of its poorest citizens -- despite politicians' reliance on that same population to maintain the political status quo at the state, parish and municipal level. The dirty secret of Louisiana's poverty politics is now broadcast for the world to see. At this point, the only question is how much longer the state's unwillingness -- or inability -- to serve vast segments of its population will continue to be tolerated.

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