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**KENNEDY FLOOR STATEMENT FOLLOWING VISIT TO
GULF COAST REGION**
(As Prepared for Delivery)

On Friday, thirteen of my colleagues and I visited the stricken city of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to see Katrina's devastation firsthand and hear from the affected residents. Like so many millions of Americans, I've been moved by the news coverage of Katrina and her brutal aftermath for the past three weeks. But nothing I've seen on television, nothing I've read in the newspapers, and nothing I've heard from the survivors we've embraced in Massachusetts could prepare me for the staggering scope of the devastation when witnessed first hand.

The destruction is massive in its scope. In many areas, the destruction is total. Much of New Orleans is a ghost town. Troops and police patrol eerily quiet streets. The desolation is frighteningly real.

At least 40 percent of New Orleans was devastated by the calamity. We could see the high water marks on buildings, far above our heads. Debris is strewn everywhere. Massive amounts muck, black as ink and ringed with the rainbow swirls of oil and chemicals, cover everything.

For so many of our fellow citizens – from New Orleans and throughout the Gulf region – there is nothing to return to. In Mississippi, entire communities are completely gone. All that's left of entire blocks are the concrete slabs where families once lived. Even the old oaks that graced Mississippi's historic shoreline for generations could not withstand Katrina's wrath.

Survivors' stories are heart wrenching. Three babies died at the New Orleans convention center from heat exhaustion. A first responder at the convention center found he was the only doctor for 10,000 people. Dozens of elderly residents died of heat stroke or kidney failure. One woman waded through the floodwaters to Charity Hospital, floating her husband's body alongside her on a door.

In Pass Christian, Mississippi, the police heroically stayed behind and braved the storm to rescue as many people as they could. Finally, as the flood waters were rising, they saved themselves by climbing onto the roof of the police station and watched their cruiser below tossed by the surging tide.

Rescue workers we spoke with there found some 80 bodies – many in the attics of their homes, dead after desperately trying to claw their way through the roof to survival. Scratch marks were visible on the rooftops.

The city's mayor is still missing. But the city attorney has been named acting mayor and has stepped up as a leader with determination and compassion, helping people recover and rebuild their lives.

So much has been destroyed. But the spirit of the people we met remains strong. Like Job of the Old Testament, these people have had everything they own and cherish torn from their grasp.

But they are determined to recover and rebuild their lives. They still have hope – and we must do all we can to help them.

I was inspired by the heroism of the relief workers, the military, the churches, neighbors, friends, strangers – all coming together to support those in need – truly America at its best. Those we met on Friday were physically and emotionally exhausted. There still doesn't seem to be enough time each day to help all those who need our aid – not enough energy to heal the many broken hearts. Relief workers have suffered broken bones, sprained ankles, sunburns, dehydration, and infections from the contaminated floodwaters.

But they press on, for they know there is so much remaining to be done. Those we met have an unyielding determination to rebuild that treasured region and rejuvenate its unique spirit. The work they do every minute, every hour, every day since Katrina struck, helps us all – our whole American family. They need to know that we are listening, and that we hear their concerns. We will not ignore them or put them aside. They deserve our leadership and our support, and we must prove to them that we are equal to the task.

States across the country are responding, and I'm proud of Massachusetts' efforts. Almost 500 Army and Air National Guard soldiers and airmen from our state have been sent to provide direct support to the hurricane victims as part of Operation Helping Hand. They're performing functions as diverse as security, command and control, law enforcement, communications, medical care, including mental health care, and spiritual guidance. The Massachusetts Guard has also activated an additional 150 persons for indirect support, staffing the Joint Operations Center and helping with logistics and airlifts. We've shipped more than 200 tons of cargo using 17 aircraft, including Humvees, trucks, trailers, generators, a field ambulance, meals ready to eat, water, cots, tents, and medical supplies.

There are almost 200 evacuees now living at Camp Edwards on Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod. We've enrolled them in health care plans, helped children find their parents, offered mental health counseling, and enabled those who qualify for veterans benefits and Social Security benefits to continue to receive them without interruption or delay – anything to make them feel welcome and at home.

For the evacuees who express interest in staying in Massachusetts, we're working with local housing authorities to have them placed in our towns, and the Black Ministerial Alliance has welcomed them into our congregations. FEMA will pay for plane tickets anywhere in the United States to reunite the evacuees with their family and friends.

Finding employment for evacuees and schooling for their children are top priorities, and Massachusetts businesses and schools are eagerly lending a hand. Some have already found employment, and a job fair at the base has helped others.

Massachusetts colleges have been eager to pitch in as well. 60 public, private, and community

colleges have enrolled over 1,000 displaced students and offered to assist them with financial aid. Displaced undergraduates will be able to attend public colleges and universities tuition-free. And many campuses have offered to expedite admission, waive fees, and help secure housing. UMass Amherst has already enrolled more than a dozen undergraduate students and is housing them in local hotels until more permanent housing is secured. Boston University has accepted 321 displaced students. Boston College has accepted 150 students from Loyola and Tulane. Amherst is taking in students from Xavier and Tulane. Amherst and Williams College have invited faculty from Xavier to join their campuses for the semester.

Katherine Barnett, a graduate student from Tulane, is now attending Boston University. "I didn't think attending BU was going to be an option, but everyone there has been totally great," she said.

When the tsunami struck Indonesia in December, and when earthquakes devastated Armenia, El Salvador, and Iran, the courageous team of health professionals from Massachusetts General Hospital was always among the first to respond. The team's response to Katrina is no different. Dr. Susan Briggs from Massachusetts General is leading the effort. She told me progress is being made with two mobile clinics, and they're reaching those in more remote areas. But in New Orleans, they're discovering many new storm-related medical needs as people begin to return to the city.

Three medical teams from Boston and one team from Worcester have been on the scene since the earliest hours of the disaster, and they have kept up a steady pace. Additional truckloads of medical supplies left Massachusetts at 5 o'clock this morning for the Gulf, where our medical personnel are working. They've dropped everything to help out.

As we traveled in New Orleans and Mississippi, I was heartened by the spirit of determination to overcome this disaster and improve the lives of those most affected. I saw it on the faces of those who stayed behind to help with rescue and relief efforts, just as I have seen it in the faces of those who have had to leave all they know and go to safe havens across the country. It is the same spirit of determination that will carry them down the long road to rebuilding.

The residents of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans take pride in their cities and towns, and they want to lead the way in reviving their own communities. They should not be ignored.

First and foremost this means that we cannot have big businesses and outside contractors taking over the process of rebuilding. Local businesses -- big and small -- should get the lion's share of the work. And local people should get the lion's share of the jobs. New Orleans businesses and residents should rebuild New Orleans. Bay St. Louis should rebuild Bay St. Louis. Pass Christian should rebuild Pass Christian. And we should be there to help.

Community leaders I spoke with in New Orleans mentioned the 9/11 families and their ability to band together as a voice for change, successfully pressuring the White House and Congress to form the independent 9/11 commission. Katrina survivors, they told me, don't need veto power over every proposal to rebuild their region -- they just need a voice in the rebuilding of their own communities.

There has been much discussion of the economic despair of those who were stranded in New Orleans and other areas, because they did not have the resources to escape the storm and flood.

An enormous tragedy has afflicted a forgotten segment of our society, and it shames us all that in a country as rich as ours, we were not able to provide for the safety and security of all our citizens, but allowed race and class to devastate them.

Our collective effort for rebuilding and reconstruction is an opportunity to make amends for decades of neglect, and genuinely address the needs of those most direly affected by this disaster.

Estimates of the federal government's investment in this rebuilding effort are now as high as \$200 billion. We must be certain that these funds go to the rebuilding of the new Gulf Coast and not to the accounts of the biggest contractors with the best political connections. The enormous job of rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast must be done right.

The national government can help most by seeking to develop a common plan for the redevelopment of the region. We should have a commission on which everyone has a say – mayors, governors, community leaders, business leaders, citizens, the federal government – everyone. There should be hearings throughout the area to listen to the people's views of the kind of future they want. We should listen to the people of New Orleans on how they wish to revive the vitality of that special city. We should involve the best flood control engineers, the best community and urban development specialists, the best city planners, the best of everything.

Redevelopment should not be determined by the biggest most powerful contractors. We need to work from a shared vision for the future in which we all do our part to build the new Gulf Coast.

I commend President Bush for making the rebuilding of this damaged region a high priority for the federal government, and I believe a commission would give all of us the plan we need to get the job done right.

We must cultivate and promote public-private partnerships that are so important to successful community redevelopment. Already, many organizations are setting about the business of rebuilding in the Gulf Coast region. Private companies like Starwood Hotels and Resorts in New Orleans have already set a re-opening date of November 1, and local small business owners are beginning to set up shop again. National and local philanthropic organizations like the Baton Rouge Area Foundation are beginning to examine the long-term housing needs of the area.

National efforts like those of ACORN are underway to organize residents who have been displaced and given them a fair voice and fair representation in the process.

All of these groups and many others are key partners in the federal, state, and local efforts to rebuild the Gulf Coast communities devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

It is essential, too, for contracts for rebuilding to include training for local people to do the jobs.

That means training local residents for debris removal, environmental clean-up, construction trades and other skills necessary to get the region back on its feet.

Billions of federal dollars will be devoted to the effort. We must make sure that it is the

residents of the region that benefit through jobs and training.

We must give urgent attention to the few hospitals and clinics that are still operating, but they are working with reduced staff and few resources. Many, like East Jefferson General Hospital in the New Orleans area, do not have the resources to remain open much longer without government help.

We should also give urgent attention to schools, to help that few that can reopen to do so, and to build new ones that can become the anchors for new communities.

We must also make sure that we rebuild in a thoughtful way, drawing on the many lessons that we have learned from this disaster and other efforts at community building.

We need to build water control systems that will be able to withstand giant hurricanes and floods in the future. We need to rebuild roads and sewers and power lines and whole public transportation systems. We need to restore the ecological resources of the region.

The rebuilding process should not merely involve reproducing structures and systems in the way that they existed before the hurricane and flood. The people of the region have an opportunity to create better water control systems to ensure that this does not happen again. They have a chance to improve schools and rely on technologies necessary in the new economy. They have a chance to build the Gulf economy of the future – and in doing so to improve the entire nation's economic destiny. They have a chance to build a new economy that works for everyone – with diverse housing and more job opportunities.

This new economy will of course still include a vibrant tourism industry, and there will continue to be jobs for the many service workers who call New Orleans home. A local union representative stressed to me that New Orleans can't just be a city in which only millionaires can afford to live.

I am deeply concerned that the Department of Labor in Washington has taken harmful steps that will hurt the effort to revive the region. They have said that the big outside contractors moving into the area can pay construction workers sub-standard wages. These workers have lost everything, and they are desperate to rebuild their homes and their lives and their communities. Yet now these giant contractors can come in from outside and deny fair wages.

That's just wrong.

The Department of Labor also says these big contractors don't have to reach out to hire minority workers. Yet, more than 40 percent of the people of New Orleans are African-Americans. They represent a vast share of the people in the shelters who are left with nothing. How can the Labor Department say that these outside contractors can come into Louisiana and Mississippi, and thumb their nose at African-American workers there?

That, too, is gravely wrong. In his speech to the nation last Thursday, President Bush acknowledged that we must address the legacy of poverty as we rebuild. But authorizing sub-

standard wages and turning our back on minority workers is not the way to meet that goal.

We have the ability in Congress to help New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area to rebuild themselves better than ever. All we need is the will to do it. I've talked with my colleagues from the region in their offices and I listened to them on Friday as we saw the storm-ravaged areas. Senators Landrieu, Vitter, Lott, Cochran, Sessions, and Shelby are determined to get the Gulf Coast back up on its feet, and I have appreciated the opportunity to discuss this with them.

I appreciate, also, the leadership that Senator Enzi has provided on this issue as chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Under his leadership, we introduced a strong bipartisan relief measure on education that should be before the Senate very soon. And we hope to have measures to meet the health and employment needs very soon.

Senator Landrieu in particular has been an inspiration to us all. She was tireless in her efforts to expedite the federal response to the hurricane and is extraordinary in her resolve to help New Orleans recover. Her strength is a comfort to her constituents – and to the nation.

Senator Frist, our leader, deserves praise as he returned briefly to his earlier career as Dr. Frist. I truly admire his courageous efforts to provide medical care in the early days at the makeshift hospital at the New Orleans airport.

Friday was not a one-time visit. It was just one day – but it will be a day I will not forget. We will not simply move on to a new issue tomorrow. This wound in our nation runs deep, and our response must be equal to the task. The hurricane destroyed communities, but it did not and could not destroy their spirit. They will rebuild, and we will help them to the very best of our ability, because in the end, we are one nation, one people, one family. It is in this way that we can best tap the true wealth of our nation. We must get it right.

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