

The Power to Influence

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Many recall the image of two Louisiana women, Governor Kathleen Blanco and U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu, along with New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, riding in an open truck surveying the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina and the failed levee system. Seeing this picture, an outsider might have formed the idea that Louisiana women were well represented in the state and federal government. Such is not the case. Pre- and post-Katrina, Mary Landrieu, a Democrat from New Orleans, is the only woman to serve in Louisiana's nine member congressional delegation.¹

August 2005, Kathleen Blanco was the only woman to hold a statewide elective office. Choosing not to seek re-election, Blanco has been succeeded by Bobby Jindal. Thus in 2008, Louisiana has no female statewide elected executives. Jindal has appointed a woman, Angele Davis, as Commissioner of Administration, the state's Chief Administrative Officer, and two other women serve in his 17 member cabinet, Kristy Nichols as Interim Secretary of the Department of Social Services, and Cynthia Bridges as Secretary of the Department of Revenue.²

The picture is equally bleak in the state legislature where term limits have resulted in fewer women overall. In 2005, 24 women served in Louisiana's 144 member state legislature; 7 in the 39 member senate and 18 in the 105 member house for a total of 17.4 percent female. However, in 2008, women comprise just 14.6 percent of the legislature with 8 women in the senate and 13 in the house of representatives. Although no woman has served as senate president or speaker of the house, a bright spot is found in the election of Sharon Weston Broome (D-15) as Senate President Pro Tempore, and the election of Karen Carter Peterson

(D-93) as Speaker Pro Tempore.³

At the local level, women have been in the majority on the New Orleans City Council for several years. In 2005, four of seven members were women and currently, five of seven members are female. In addition, four of the six members of the Mayor's Executive staff are women, including Dr. Brenda Hatfield who serves as Chief Administrative Officer.

While the needs of women post-Katrina are ignored or remain buried under political indifference and infighting, it is critical for women's voices to be heard. The importance of having women in high level appointed and elective positions cannot be overestimated at this stage of rebuilding and for the development of long-term plans that include attention to women's physical, psychological, social and economic vulnerabilities and strengths. Women can and do make a difference. The findings of researchers provide evidence that women elected to office feel they serve a dual role, first serving both women and men of their districts and then representing women outside their districts.⁴ Moreover, women legislators are more likely than men to sponsor and vote for legislation dealing with issues such as child care and health-care reform, concerns more critical than ever to Louisiana women.⁵ There is strong evidence to suggest that Louisiana women have been aided in the post-Katrina era by the work in the U.S. Senate of Senator Mary Landrieu, particularly in the areas of housing and federal assistance.

Government Accountability

Louisiana women have several resources at the state level that should be held accountable for representing the needs and concerns of women and called upon

to monitor the state's efforts to address the long-term needs of women for housing, health care, education, employment, child care and safety. Chief among these resources is the Governor's Office on Women's Policy (OWP). The OWP is the primary point of contact on all issues related to women in Louisiana and advises the Governor directly on policy issues for women. One of OWP's goals is to continue to strengthen the role of the Office on Women's Policy in the State of Louisiana by increased funding for the Office.⁶

A second resource is the Louisiana Women's Policy and Research Commission, which works closely with the Governor's Office on Women's Policy. The primary mission of the Commission is to identify and analyze trends regarding the health and prosperity of women, and to monitor the status of women in Louisiana in order to evaluate economic, educational, and health concerns, needs and hardships. Under the administration of Governor "Mike" Foster (1996-2000, 2000-2004), the Commission was actively involved in collecting and analyzing data and working with the legislators, particularly the Louisiana Legislative Women's Caucus, to introduce legislation benefiting women's employment opportunities and health.⁷ It is recommended that funding for the Louisiana Office of Women's Policy be increased to enable extensive Louisiana-based research that draws upon the findings of this report and the "Louisiana Women Leaders" initiative with regard to pay equity, women-owned businesses, women's safety and security, statewide child care, care-related training programs, expanded employment opportunities, and other issues impacting the health and well-being of women of the state. These research findings will form the basis for policy recommendations for implementation at the administrative as well as the legislative level within the state.

The Louisiana Legislative Women's Caucus, comprised of all women legislators, has as a central part of its

mission to "serve as the premiere voice and leading monitor of issues, legislation and policies, which impact women." The Caucus has four primary areas of interest: education and training; women's health advocacy; youth development/civic involvement; and serving as a resource center for information and networking.⁸

Previous New Orleans mayors, notably Dutch Morial, sponsored a Women's Office as an important department in their administrations. While mayors in recent years have sponsored conferences for women, a unit devoted to the concerns and welfare of women has not been funded for at least the past ten years. The need for such a unit is obvious. Therefore it is recommended that a department reporting to the New Orleans city mayor be reestablished to serve and represent the interests and concerns of all women of the city with regard to health, education, employment, earnings and safety. The overall objective of this department will be to improve the socio-economic status of women in the city. In addition, this department will serve as a liaison to the Office of Homeland Security & Public Safety in disaster planning, preparations, and recovery to represent the needs of women, particularly those who are most often invisible such as the elderly, low-income, disabled, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women.

For the well-being of women, families, neighborhoods and communities, it is essential for women to be full participants in disaster planning processes and policy development to ensure that gender considerations are mainstreamed into the disaster management system. Women need to be at the policy table to develop short- and long-term goals that prioritize the social, economic, health, education, and safety of the entire community in disaster planning and management. Special efforts need to be made to recognize and encourage women's leadership at the community, city and state levels and include women in each phase of disaster management.

Endnotes

- 1 http://louisiana.gov/Government/Legislative_Branch/ Accessed November 8, 2008
- 2 <http://gov.louisiana.gov>
- 3 http://llwc.louisiana.gov/llwc_LegisDirectoryMISC.asp; http://house.louisiana.gov/H_Staff/H_Staff_MajorOfficers.htm; <http://senate.legis.state.la.us/default.asp>
- 4 Carroll, Susan J. 2000. "Representing Women: Congresswomen's Perceptions of Their Representational Roles." Center for the American Woman and Politics. <<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Research/Reports/congroles.pdf>>
- 5 Carroll, Susan J. (ed.) 2001. *The Impact of Women in Public Office*. Indiana University Press.
- 6 Proctor, Shanta, Former Executive Director, Office of Women's Policy. Communication with the author, April 7, 2008. Also see <http://www.la-womenspolicy.com/welcome.cfm>. Peggy Gehbauer has been appointed Executive Director by Governor Bobby Jindal. As of December 1, 2008, no one has been appointed to the position of Special Assistant to the Governor on Women's Policy.
- 7 <http://www.la-womenscommission.com>
- 8 <http://llwc.louisiana.gov/>