

Southern Mutual Help Association

New Iberia, LA

www.southernmutualhelp.org

Est. 1969



MISSION

The Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA) has vowed to build healthy, prosperous communities in Louisiana since its founding 40 years ago. It encourages public, private and non-profit institutions to invest effectively in low wealth communities; gives face and voice to the faceless and voiceless; and provides leadership and develops ideas and models to further the work of strengthening rural communities.

“The majority of poverty in my 45 years of experience working in the rural South is really due to systems that don’t work for the poor,” said Lorna Bourg, executive director of SMHA. In response, the organization strives to fight poverty through the “3 Ps”: policy, partnerships and philanthropy.

RURAL RECOVERY

Like countless other people of the Deep South, SMHA had serious challenges to face after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. The organization

did its best to “plan on the move” and created a hands-on Rural Recovery Task Force to respond to the devastation. The task force has made considerable progress since then, with nearly 5500 volunteers helping families recover, and 1009 homeowners, fishers, farmers, businesses and churches helping to rebuild the affected areas.

Recovery efforts also focus on stopping the spread of oppression throughout local communities and teaching people how to truly live together. “When you have a poor community with such deferred care, maintenance and investment, the people begin to internalize their own devaluation so there is less excitement on their part to invest in themselves,” explained Bourg.

With the help of partners like the Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Building Rural Communities Collaborative, SMHA is working to “create a new paradigm of how people live together.” An example of this is Teche Ridge, a mixed-income,

mixed-use, smart-growth building project that was designed to bridge the gap between lower and higher income communities. It is believed that “without economic distinction and geographic separation, families from different walks of life will mutually benefit from exposure to each other.”

PHILANTHROPY’S ROLE

Though Hurricanes Katrina and Rita led to what Lorna Bourg calls “the greatest acts of philanthropy I’ve seen in 40 years,” she feels that philanthropy is capable of even more.

“Particularly in the Deep South, people understand generosity and charity in terms of emergency crisis, food lines and shelters. All of these things are good and necessary, but we question why we need that kind of philanthropy in such a prosperous country,” she said.

Southern Mutual Help Association would like to see philanthropy mature beyond the service industry and charitable donations to include development giving. SMHA believes that “the systemic kinds of changes that need to happen through policy and the broadening of the concept of philanthropy, especially through our community foundations,” are necessary to make a serious dent in ending poverty. ■

Meredith Brodbeck, communications assistant at NCRP, prepared this member profile. Helen Vinton, deputy director of the Southern Mutual Help Association, served as a member of NCRP’s board of directors from 2004-2009.



Top Right: Lorna Bourg, president and executive director of SMHA and State Representative Sydnie Mae Durand take the only means available to do a first-hand assessment of the damage along the Louisiana coast after Hurricane Katrina. Above: SMHA partnered with New Iberia’s Mayor Curry, Architects Southwest and a local donor to revive a major historical community. Photos courtesy of SMHA.