



610 Water Street, Biloxi, MS 39530 ▪ (228) 265-2138 ▪ [stepscoalition.org](http://stepscoalition.org)

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POC: Steps Coalition Office: (228) 265-2138

Fax: (228) 432-9312

[stepscoalition@gmail.com](mailto:stepscoalition@gmail.com)

<http://www.stepscoalition.org>

## **The Five Barriers to Rebuilding an Equitable Gulf Coast**

*The Steps Coalition is composed of 52 non-profit organizations whose collective mission is to promote the recovery of healthy, just and sustainable communities in South Mississippi. Coalition members believe that creating livable communities requires a commitment to five essential values: affordable housing, community preservation, economic justice, environmental justice, and human rights. Our goals include identifying solutions that address the big picture and advocating for their implementation.*

***We have identified five major barriers to achieving these goals:***

### **- Barrier #1**

#### **A LACK OF RELIABLE DATA:**

The most prominent and reoccurring barrier to recovery is the lack of information and statistically significant data from a trusted source. Although several large national foundations and corporations have gathered recovery data in Mississippi, these reports are inconsistent with each other, and are insufficient. Non-profits are therefore placed in the middle of a dialogue between policy makers who assert that available recovery services are adequate and those who they witness experiencing a stalled recovery. It is apparent that if federal, state, and local agencies charged with developing and administering programs cannot track the actual needs, they cannot possibly meet those needs.

### **- Barrier #2**

#### **DECISION MAKING WITHOUT THE FACTS:**

By not seeking specific localized data or addressing the evidence submitted by non-profits and direct service providers, the State remains entrenched in a generalized belief that its' recovery programs are effective in meeting the needs of residents. As the State is relying on incomplete and inaccurate data, it has rendered whole segments of the population invisible. Advocates are left to amplify the voices of those they serve, provide emergency services, and struggle to inform policy in the face of systems that ineffectively address the need.

### **- Barrier #3**

#### **DISEMPOWERMENT OF THE MOST VULNERABLE:**

Programs are designed and executed under the assumption that all individuals have the same capacity to navigate bureaucratic systems in this post-disaster climate. We know that due to

historical socioeconomic inequity and educational disparities, a large proportion of residents are less prepared to confront the obstacles they face in order to access recovery funds. Further, service providers and community organizers have evidence that large numbers of residents are experiencing inconsistent and unreliable responses from all programs (federal, state, and charitable) that are designed for recovery. As a result of these obstacles, residents slip into a state of hopelessness and stop seeking help from the very agency programs purportedly created to help them.

**- Barrier #4**

**LACK OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:**

Compartmentalization of agencies providing relief has resulted in a lack of accountability and communication in the recovery effort. Responsibility is constantly shifted between individuals, departments, and agencies, resulting in frustrated residents, inhibited communication about available resources and stalled progress. When official information is confusing, contradictory, or unavailable, residents are forced to seek other means of recovery. This often translates into displacement and dissolution of historical communities. Those with the least ability to access information and results face the greatest barriers to recovery.

**-Barrier #5**

**CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES IN DEFINING OUR "NEW COAST":**

The official story is that the Gulf Coast is rebuilding "better than ever" as evidenced by the rebound of our tourism-driven economy. Yet what is threatened by focusing on business are some of our region's key traditional strengths -- rich cultural, ethnic and racial diversity, ecologic resources including wetlands and waterways, and strong, neighborhood oriented communities. We spend time and resources debating whether we will or will not restore affordable housing to where it existed before the storm, keeping our most vulnerable neighbors anxiously wondering whether they will have a future in their own communities. Two years out, respecting our diverse priorities and finding a common vision will be one step towards a more complete recovery.

*Despite these serious barriers, the Steps Coalition firmly believes that by facing facts squarely and developing collaborative, holistic solutions, we can overcome such obstacles. We can more adequately mobilize the resources of all three sectors (public, private, and non-profit) and the individuals they serve, all of whom share an equal stake in the future of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We must approach the remainder of our recovery proactively, in a way that considers the "lessons learned" from our past, so that together we can transform our Gulf Coast home into communities that are just, equitable, and sustainable for all.*



The Steps Coalition  
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