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October 10, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We congratulate you on your recent honor as the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Your message of hope and peace has resonated in a world that believes you will usher in a new era of progressive peace talks in the world.

When we learned of your upcoming visit to the Gulf Coast, we too were filled with hope that your visit would include Mississippi where the eye of Hurricane Katrina roared through devastating thousands of homes and families. Working families are still struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina in the midst of a depressed economy and an unemployment rate of 9 percent. We are pleased that you are fulfilling a commitment to visit the region before the conclusion of 2009; however, we are concerned that there is no plan to visit the state of Mississippi, where we experience the historical gap between working families in Mississippi and federal leaders.

All of our letters of invitation to engage directly with grassroots community leaders have been politely declined by members of your Administration visiting the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Recent visits by cabinet members to the Gulf South have not always included Mississippi and when Mississippi was included, community groups have been ignored and/or denied an audience to personally express unmet needs and federal agency gaps. Steps Coalition allies hear regularly from residents who describe deep frustration with complex, shifting, and excessively risk-averse requirements imposed by federal and state officials.

In Steps' housing report "Has Mississippi Fallen Further Behind," issued on the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we acknowledge that both HUD and Mississippi share responsibility for flaws that have left thousands of households still without permanent housing four years after Katrina. With HUD approval, Mississippi has denied compensation to thousands of lower-income wind damaged homeowners, who now live in unrepaired housing or have been forced to become renters. Four years after Katrina, HUD and Mississippi have failed to deliver a large enough supply of affordable housing under the state's dramatically underperforming small rental and long term workforce housing programs. Also, HUD has failed to heed Mississippi's appeal to apply common sense instead of bureaucratic rigidity to the important issue of duplication of benefits, which limits the ability of ordinary citizens to use the full spectrum of resources to achieve permanent housing. Affordable housing, jobs for residents, quality education and affordable healthcare are the basic desires of Mississippi's working families. These families are often not heard.

We want to partner with you and your administration to ensure that people most in need do not remain last in line for assistance. The geographic area devastated and affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is wide across many counties in three states. However, we would like to provide you with a comprehensive picture of the current state of Mississippi are working families that are still in need.

We are available to you, your Administration and staff as organizing resources representing people who are still struggling to rebuild, recover and discover a “new” normal for quality of life. We know that your steadfast support and leadership is essential to hold local and state leaders accountable and transparent. We look forward to closing the historical gap between working families in Mississippi and federal leaders.

Just as Mississippi needed President Grant’s attention during reconstruction, we need you, President Obama.

Sincerely,

Roberta Avila, Executive Director  
Steps Coalition

Charmel Gaulden, Executive Director  
Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center