August 31, 2015

Howard University Community,

This weekend, the nation remembered the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Throughout the past week, Howard University joined in the time of remembrance and reflected on our response to support students and families impacted by the storm. Today, I would like to pay my respects to those who were and are still living in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina resonated throughout our society, proving that water has as much power to destroy, erode and exhume physical elements as societal issues. The waters tore away not only levies, but veils of disenfranchisement, abject poverty, racism, and deep-seated injustices that have carried on from generation to generation. In many ways, Hurricane Katrina exposed the world to our nation’s deepest issues. Global citizens watched in terror and wondered how the most powerful nation in the world; the land of democracy and justice, could allow such a great tragedy to occur.

Unfortunately, it could happen quite easily. When the fight for voting rights still rages on 50 years after the law passed to secure those rights, situations like this can happen. When the definitions of citizenship and humanity are dependent upon how a police officer feels about a man or woman who is profiled unjustifiably, it can easily happen. When we still ask if we are a free nation, 51 years after the Civil Rights Act and 65 years since Emmett Till’s murder, it surely can happen and if we are not diligent in our efforts to support and restore the communities and populations that have been ravaged by natural and societal disasters, it will happen again.

During Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of students were threatened with having their dreams of attending college washed away. These were the students who aspired for higher education for the sake of their communities. Education is the great equalizer and to have a hurricane wash away their hopes for a better future is as great a tragedy as the storm itself. That is why Howard University opened its doors to victims of Hurricane Katrina and continues in its support today. This is why Howard develops students to be servant leaders and to give back. Support like this must continue nationwide. Recently, we have seen cities ravaged by their own disasters, both natural and societal; resulting in the exposure of issues that our nation would prefer to ignore. From Ferguson to Baltimore, California to Florida, disasters that leave the disenfranchised leveled in their wake prove that we have much more work to do as a nation.

Today, the question is not, “How could something like this happen?” but rather “What is left to be done?” Let us finish the work and restore truth, justice and freedom to its rightful place in cities affected by Hurricane Katrina and our nation.

In Truth and Service,

Wayne A. I. Frederick, M.D., MBA
President