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Flooding Response: A Call for All Hands on Deck

Statement of Alderman Ashanti Hamilton August 13, 2010

On July 22, we responded to an emergency situation. The flood and storms that devastated our city were treated as an emergency and response teams from every level of government worked together to respond to a crisis situation. Throughout this crisis, emergency crews have dedicated themselves to cleaning up the catastrophes the flood left behind and neighborhoods and volunteers have forged incredible teams to help clean basements and provide additional support.

We must recognize – we are still in emergency mode. The recovery process must be treated with the same sense of urgency and importance as the floods themselves were. The continued cooperation of government and community agencies at every level is essential because people are still living in devastation.

As a result of the discussion during the community meeting on August 11, I am proposing a number of things that can help facilitate this recovery process and keep our focus in an emergency mode of thinking in order to best help those affected.

We simply must help these residents now; we cannot wait for FEMA.

I am asking Mayor Barrett, County Executive Walker and other local officials to explore using community development block grant funds or other funding options to help flood victims replace vital items such as hot water heaters and air conditioners and to find long-term housing for those left homeless because of the damage.

Second, I've made it clear to city officials that it is unacceptable for the city to be harassing property owners and others with condemnation letters and other orders. This is not the time for us to be causing more pain and worry for those who have suffered catastrophic losses.

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In fact, I'm asking that the Mayor order that the city waive and/or defer demolition charges and other related charges for those who have either lost their home or face major repair and remodeling costs.

We must allow residents time to make needed repairs while we all await a final response from FEMA about assistance and/or insurance companies' responses.

Third, the **free debris pickups by our sanitation crews should not end today**, as planned. The no-charge pickups should continue indefinitely in the hardest hit city neighborhoods.

Fourth, I am asking that we explore the possibility of allowing displaced and homeless flood damage victims to reside in some of the city's thousands of unoccupied, foreclosed homes. We should not abandon these residents – many of them families with young children. We need to explore all options to help provide them with long-term, stable housing.

Fifth, **the city and the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District need to look hard at ways we can avoid having this devastation ever happen again**. It is unacceptable to have a sewer system that fails us when we need it most. It is completely unacceptable to have a system that is supposed to prevent horrible basement flooding and backups actually be responsible for *causing* the heartbreaking devastation.

I also want to remind all of us that this is a crisis situation. Surviving these losses can cause an incredible emotional toll on people's lives. Milwaukee County offers assistance to crisis victims through their behavioral health division. Their 24-hour crisis line, 257-7222 is available for those who would like assistance with the stresses of recovery.

Lastly, I am requesting a **citywide meeting** with the Mayor, County Executive Walker, community leaders, community-based organizations and other officials to discuss these proposals and other available courses of action.