

In the 1930s, the government put more than 4 million people to work in two months through the Civil Works Project, a bold step to relieve America's record unemployment and poverty during the Great Depression. Why, wondered San Jose State University sociology Professor Scott Myers-Lipton, couldn't something similar be done for residents of the Gulf Coast, whose lives, homes and communities were devastated by Hurricane Katrina?

That was a little more than five weeks ago. Thursday, at simultaneous events in San Jose, New Orleans and Gulfport, Miss., Myers-Lipton, students and the NAACP launched what they hope will be national grass-roots push to help make the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project a reality.

Organizers in each location issued a call to enlist hundreds of college students across the nation to support "Louisiana Winter," -- scheduled for Jan. 14 to 20 -- a week of organizing in dozens of Louisiana and Mississippi cities and towns. There, students can see and learn from residents what they need for recovery.

"I want to hear firsthand what they want and need, and how they want us to help them," said San Jose State sophomore Victoria Chavez, 19, one of about two dozen South Bay students helping to plan the event. "We have a moral responsibility to help people."

The goal of Louisiana Winter is to drum up national momentum for Congress to authorize a \$3.1 billion public-works project -- the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project -- to hire 100,000 Gulf Coast residents to rebuild the region's homes, levees, parks and schools. The project, Myers-Lipton said, would provide living-wage jobs, rebuild communities and restore a sense of faith in government.

During next month's effort, students, who will be fed and housed in the local communities, will spend their mornings talking with residents about life before and after the hurricane, then handing out fliers explaining the Gulf Coast project and how to support it. Town hall meetings will be held each night to discuss the project, and what's needed to get Congress to act.

The idea, Lipton-Myers said, seems to be catching fire. Although it may seem audacious, the concept for the Gulf Coast project was a natural for Lipton-Myers, 47, whose first book, "Social Solutions to Poverty," was published earlier this year.

The book was an outgrowth of Lipton-Myers' "Poverty, Wealth and Privilege" class. Responding to students' interest in solutions, Myers-Lipton discovered there was no book that comprehensively examined America's attempt to solve the plight of its poor. After 18 months of research, his book was born.

Myers-Lipton received his inspiration for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project after camping out with students who were protesting poverty in Santa Clara County on Election Day. They also saw Spike Lee's film "When the Levees Broke."

Both the professor and his students think the Gulf Coast project is more than a pipe dream. Myers-Lipton has enlisted the help of Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., the ranking Democrat on the Homeland Security Committee. Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose, had passed the proposal on to Thompson, her congressional seatmate. Other organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also are throwing their weight behind the effort. Myers-Lipton's Web site (www.solvingpoverty.com) will chronicle students' experiences in Louisiana Winter and track the progress of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. A documentary may also be in the works.

Myers-Lipton's dream is that Louisiana Winter will become this generation's call to action for human rights, just as Mississippi Summer in 1964 was a call to action for thousands of students who came South to work for civil rights. The students are fundraising to help cover the \$500 cost for each student. The public can help in other ways, Myers-Lipton said, for example, by writing to congressional representatives to support the project. "People want to move from a culture of fear to a culture of hope," Myers-Lipton said. "That's what people are responding to."