philanthropy hub

Disaster Relief: Applying the Lessons Learned

By: Jennifer Ahern Lammers

In the days that followed the events of September 11th, 2001 we all struggled to deal with the overwhelming loss and devastation the attacks caused. In such a sort period of time, so many lives were lost and our world forever changed.

Those of us charged with responding to the crisis were also forced to contend, real time, with the historical changes the unprecedented outpouring of global support brought to our field. Never before, had so much money been given so quickly, by so many – with so little consensus as to the ultimate use of the funds. The media scrutiny that accompanied this philanthropic outpouring also served to highlight just how complicated and emotionally charged crisis response charity work can be. The needs of the victims proved to be many, diverse and not always immediately apparent – yet the desire for healing and resolution was acute and the demand for immediate results was great.

The learning curve was steep and there is no doubt that mistakes were made and gross communication failures occurred. But much good was done too. More people were helped in a shorter period of time than ever before. And true to the introspective nature of the sector, over arching, systematic recommendations for change were also developed to address many of flaws that September 11th brought to light.

So it is not surprising that this September as I sit, glued to my television set, watching the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina unfold, I am transported back to those difficult months in 2001 and 2002 in New York. My heart goes out to everyone touched by this horrific storm – but it is for the first responders and the nonprofit leaders, whose work has just begun, that I feel the most. It is my hope that the lessons learned 4 years ago will help you find your way a little quicker. God speed and good luck.

Sector Coordination is Key

While coordination of service providers takes time, effort, and *funding*, its importance cannot be overstated. No organization can do everything needed in the wake of a disaster. Those that have tried have failed. Coordination of efforts allows organizations to provide service in their areas of greatest competency, leaving other tasks to those groups better prepared to handle them.

Much confusion and frustration was felt on the part of the organizations responding to the 9-11 attacks. Many wished for a convenient means of obtaining information on services provided and funding available. Whether they needed to refer clients or other members of their community to other service providers, or were seeking support for their own September 11th related services, many were at a loss for where to turn for reliable information.

In particular, some organizations serving highly impacted communities, such as groups in China Town, or those addressing the needs of undocumented workers, felt out of the loop. Such non-mainstream organizations were often unaware or slower to learn of changes in government programs and/or opportunities for funding. Some these organizations even felt “squeezed out” when larger, more prominent organizations established offices and programs in their communities. Smaller and newer groups also said they experienced difficulties “breaking the code” and getting information or funding in a timely fashion.

In the wake of Katrina, coordination will be both more critical and difficult to achieve. Like the communities they serve, many of the organizations in LA, MS, and AL have been devastated. They will have to be rebuilt and re-established before they can take over the responsibility of serving the victims and victims’ families. This will take time and support, both moral and financial.

Immediate efforts should be taken to identify and reach out to those organizations that would normally serve the needs of the displaced, out-of-work, homeless, etc. in and around the impacted communities. A database should be compiled of these organizations, allowing them to find each other, coordinate rebuilding efforts, and the eventual provision of services. A means of information dissemination should be identified and used with regularity. The state and regional nonprofit associations may be a great resource in the coordination efforts, as might a strengthened regional VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) network.

2) Donors are Not Disaster Relief Experts

Disaster response philanthropy is rarely an endorsement of any organization, mission or even methodology. Instead, donating money is a way for people to give meaning to their grief, participate in the relief efforts, and feel better long before the problems are solved. In the days immediately following a disaster, charitable giving is often impulsive and slightly irrational. People want to “make things better” but really have no idea what that means or what it will really take.

It is up to the charities receiving funds to proactively manage donor expectations and lend rational dimension to the nation’s exuberance. As the experts in the field, we have an obligation to tell the public what is needed and why. We need to spell out how we are working to bring comfort and stability to the lives of those touched by the disaster. And sometimes we need to tell the general public why what they think is the answer really isn’t.

Charities receiving funds and/or providing services to victims should have appointed spokes people who are well informed on the organization’s activities and processes. Each organization should issue regular press releases and updates, and post them on their websites. In addition, such information should be proactively distributed to the media. Be sure to explain spending practices, and any unforeseen, but necessary expenses, such as additional staff, computers, and/or lodging.

To this day, I do not believe that any agency or organization responding to 9-11 set out to misrepresent what they were doing or where contributions were being applied. However, too few took the time to explain the decisions that were being made. This oversight, when coupled with the highest degree of mainstream media scrutiny ever turned on the nonprofit sector, seriously hurt our credibility with victims and donors. And the resulting back peddling allowed well meaning but uninformed donors to dictate the actions of many of the organizations responding to the attacks. In the end, this limited the experts’ ability to act strategically or do what they knew needed to be done.

3) There Are Needs that Cannot Be Seen on TV

Motivated by the terrible images they see on TV, most individual donors want to make gifts that will be used directly to provide shelter, food, and other tangible items to the victims of disaster. As such, it is incumbent on institutional donors to make the less glamorous and more strategic gifts necessary for the rebuilding and community healing to begin. Money that allows a responding organization to hire additional administrative staff or purchase needed equipment, like computers or vehicles, can have a greater impact on the number of victims served and the speed of that service, than gifts restricted to "direct service provision only".

Corporations, private foundations, and major individual donors should consider making unrestricted contributions to the relief organizations they trust, allowing these groups the flexibility to decide where and when money should be spent. If you do not trust an organization's management to make the right decisions, you should give your money to another organization. Yes. It is that simple.

It is also important to remember that while the damage created by the storm occurred over a very short period of time, the needs of the victims and their communities will take months to be identified and years to be met. Americans are incredibly generous, especially in the weeks following a disaster, but we can be a fickle bunch. Donor fatigue is real and can set in pretty fast. It can be compounded when the amounts raised are so large, and people unaffected by the disaster begin to think "how could they possibly need more?"

As such, it is essential that a portion of the funds raised in the immediate aftermath be reserved to meet the longer term needs of the victims. To avoid the pressure for rapid disbursement that followed quickly on the heels of the September 11th generosity, those organizations collecting funds for the victims of Katrina should set an appropriate spending policy now. This policy should be shared with the public, making it clear that they are committed to meeting the needs of those impacted when they arise.

4) Victims are Not as Easy to Find as You Would Think

In the weeks following September 11th, it seemed that you couldn't turn on the television without seeing a story about a family of a victim that had not been able to obtain support, despite the millions and millions of dollars donated. Yet a year after the attacks, when surveyed, many responding organizations noted that identifying, finding, and engaging victims was difficult and that many victims simply did not come forward to receive the support to which they were entitled.

This problem will be magnified many times over in the communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Records and primary residences have been destroyed. Many people have relocated and may have already begun a new life in a new city or state. They, like many victims of 9-11, may be working hard to put the disaster behind them and will not want to engage in a long, drawn out process of recounting their stories, even if it means forgoing support. Others are distrustful of government or other institutions and will not come forward for fear of being registered and tracked "by the system." Others may simply have been burned by the early mistakes of first responders and government agencies and no longer believe that any good will come of their efforts to seek assistance.

As such, it is important that those hoping to help the communities impacted by the hurricane not promise donors or the general public that they will provide payments or specific services to *all* victims or only to individuals or families. Some services and support, like the rebuilding of shelters, soup pantries, and job training programs, will have to substitute for direct gifts to impacted individuals – but in the long run these expenditures may actually speed the pace of recovery.

5) Listen to the Victims

When you are dealing with a pool of victims as diverse and dispersed as we have on the Gulf Coast, those organizations responding to the crisis must keep their ears and minds open – and be as flexible as possible. Listening to the victims and community advocates can alert you to unique or specific needs that are going unmet. As a rule, you can expect:

> There will be cultural and religious difference that will impact how some communities will respond to relief agencies and support programs.
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> There will be special language needs depending on which community is being served.
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> There will be victims without bank accounts or access to reliable check cashing services.

But there will be other issues that other disaster response organizations will not have encountered and for which you cannot prepare. For example, after September 11th, it was slowly conveyed to relief workers that families of some of the missing or deceased were destitute as a result of the loss of income from the primary provider. How could this obvious need not have been seen in the immediate aftermath of the attacks? Simple: these family members lived in Latin America and Asia and were dependent of the money the deceased remitted to the home country each month. Steps were eventually taken to identify and provide support for many of these needy families.

6) Don't Wait Until the Disaster is at Your Door

Disaster preparedness is the job of every nonprofit, whether a first responder or not. After surveying the organizations that responded to the September 11th attacks, the Metro New York Better Business Bureau compiled the attached recommendations for disaster preparations. Four years later, they remain valid.

Jennifer Ahern Lammers was the Director of the New York Philanthropic Advisor Service of the Metro NY Better Business Bureau in September of 2001. She originated and managed the National September 11th Charity Database and coordinated a series of meetings for first responders, funders and other organizations responding to the longer term needs of the families impacted by the attacks. Today, as founder of the Philanthropy Hub, a strategy consulting firm focused on helping nonprofits achieve greater results, she provides executive coaching, management training, and consulting services to a wide variety of charities throughout the country.

Recommendations for Disaster Preparedness

Compiled and published by The Metropolitan New York Better Business Bureau

Create a disaster response plan

Each organization should work with its board, staff and stakeholders to clearly identify what role the organization should or might play in the event of a national or local emergency. In determining this role, organizations are encouraged to remain true to their missions, utilize their areas of expertise or operational advantage, avoid duplication of services best provided by other organizations, and consider the strains that responding to a crisis may place on their resources, including staff, infrastructure and funding. Once the organization has established its plan for disaster response, it should be shared with all staff, board and appropriate stakeholders. Having a clearly defined plan of action will allow the organization to respond rapidly.

Establish appropriate operational procedures

Each organization, regardless of area of focus or mission should establish operational procedures that will protect your staff, clients, and ability to continue functioning in the event of a disaster. Suggested procedures include, but are not limited to the following

- Evacuation and safety procedures.
- Off-site meeting plan (knowing where to meet if the office is unavailable).
- Off-site document and data back up and storage system.
- Internal communications plans that clearly identify names, numbers and addresses for staff to call or email in the event of an emergency to receive instructions, and where pertinent information (such as personnel records or client lists) can be found
- External communications plans specifying what information should be provided and how it would best be supplied to clients, grantees or other stakeholders in the event of an emergency. These plans should specifically include procedures for communicating clearly with potential donors about the purpose of solicited contributions.
- Media communications plans that clearly identify individuals trained and designated as spokespersons for the organization.

Identify potential partners and networks

First responder organizations with a clear role in disaster recovery for their community should identify other organizations, government agencies, and for-profit companies also likely to be involved in responding. Charities and other public service groups are encouraged to consider developing recovery planning partnerships with providers whose services may resemble their own, as well as with organizations providing other services that may be needed by the organization's own client base.

Organizations with missions less directly tied to providing emergency services should be familiar with the first response organizations and their procedures so that they may direct their employees, clients and other members of their community to the appropriate sources.