Top 5 Disaster Relief and Recovery Lessons

Whether it's hurricanes in Texas, Tornadoes in Oklahoma, wildfires in Colorado, or snow in Pennsylvania—there are a number of steps experienced and new funders can do to help maximize the impact of their charitable giving and help speed up recovery efforts. As a part of the Rebuild Texas Fund, I learned a number of valuable lessons helping communities recover from Hurricane Harvey and below are my top 5.

1. **Triage, Triage, Triage -** In emergency rooms or mass casualty events, first responders triage or classify patients based on the urgency of their needs. Speed of care is essential, we learned the hard way just how fast a person's life can fall apart after a disaster where recovery time is measured in years not days. The disaster recovery phase requires a triage approach where we look holistically at the affected population and try to match solutions with providers at scale based on the need, vulnerability, available federal assistance, urgency, and other mitigating factors. In contrast, the current first-come-first-served approach often results in flexible private philanthropic resources displacing more restrictive federal funding. Optimally, to stretch limited recovery funding, philanthropic dollars should be reserved for cases that are ineligible for federal assistance.

   In order to triage funding, donors must understand the disaster's impact on the population. Quality assessments or case management of a representative subset of the population can give a rich picture of the overall need. This arms responders and funders with a good sense of the types of assistance needed, the urgency, the resources available to meet those needs, and resources/tools to be developed to bridge any gaps. But datasets are static. As the needs of the affected population change and evolve over time, so should the assistance. New data may need to be periodically collected.

   Episcopal Health Foundation and Kaiser Family Foundation were instrumental in quickly assembling macro-level data on the impact of the disaster on each region impacted by Harvey and vulnerable populations. In addition to writing a detailed report on their findings, EHF also assembled a detailed map with FEMA claims overlaid on other critical data like social vulnerability. This allowed groups to know where communities had reported damages and helped to focus resources on particularly vulnerable populations first. EHF's methodology could be quickly adapted and replicated for other disasters.

   Another key piece of data collection is through case management. When we started, disaster recovery veterans told us that disaster case managers (DCMs) funded by FEMA would take time, but no one could have anticipated the 10-month wait that ensued. We funded a limited number of DCMs in the interim to assess survivor needs and match them

to resources. Bringing in DCMs will take time and pushing for significant investment case management early on will provide valuable data needed for the recovery process. In practice this would mean identifying the organizations most likely to be involved in FEMA- or state-funded disaster case management and funding them on a conditional 6-month or 12-month grant so that once federal funding kicks in, philanthropic funding stops. Finally, even if you want to give funds directly, local funders can help you understand nuances around communities that can be hard if you're not a local. In Galveston -- a disaster-prone island with a tourism-based economy and a population of 48,000 -- we were interested in providing assistance but lacked local insights and relationships to make informed decisions. Eventually, we depended on the Galveston County Recovery Fund as a partner to help inform our grant making. Galveston foundations were able to partner with us on some grants and give us advice or recommendations on others. This allowed us to identify the highest needs and act quickly. In Southeast Texas, we partnered with the Foundation for Southeast Texas (FSETX) for local insights. After discovering many organizations required small grants which we were not structured to do on a large scale, we agreed to partner with FSETX to match their next grant round. While FSETX had a fantastic network for sourcing, good diligence practices, and a board of local community leaders, the foundation wasn't able to meet the large number of requests it had received. Through one grant to the community foundation, we were able to match FSETX's investments and expand its reach to 34 small organizations. For larger funding requests that FSETX couldn't fund, we asked FSETX to refer those to us for consideration. In most places around the country, you can find a community foundation, funder collaborative, United Way, or other grant-makers who are willing to help.

2. **Don't Overlook Rural Communities -** In any disaster that covers a large geographic area, there's a tendency for funding and resources to flow to urban areas over rural. This is due to a variety of factors from concentrated populations of survivors in urban areas, higher capacity organizations, better data or assessments, and larger funders and corporations. We decided early on to prioritize funding outside the Houston area when we saw over $200 million in private philanthropy focused on the greater Houston area and about $2 million raised for the Golden Triangle region, (Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange).

   Practically speaking this meant taking a different approach. We went to impacted communities outside of Houston first. This involved seeking out local foundations, nonprofits, politicians, religious leaders, and other community leaders to learn about the storm's impact on the area and the greatest needs moving forward. While we spent a lot of time listening, we also had rich conversations and shared what we were seeing being done in other areas--both the good and the bad. These conversations helped us source partners, needs, and solutions in communities big and small. (This was another place where having local funder relationships was extremely useful.)

Sectoral partners, like Donorschoose, On-the-Road Lending, and Communities in Schools, helped us to push out resources to harder to reach regions and organizations. As an example, reaching out to school districts initially resulted in a lot of top-driven requests such as temporary classrooms and furniture. Our partnership with Donorschoose, allowed us to source requests from individual teachers and staff who knew exactly what they needed to resume their curricula. Little Cypress-Mauriceville Independent School District received a grant from us for temporary classrooms and then turned to our match opportunity on Donorschoose to help fill the classrooms with all the supplies needed to restart classes. We employed a similar model with Texas State Affordable Housing Corporation and Enterprise Community Partners to create the HEART program. HEART provides funding and capacity building to small housing organizations not large enough to warrant direct funding. Our one grant for the HEART program, supports the application, vetting, funding, and technical assistance for participants and we hope that graduates of this program will eventually be able to apply to us for direct funding. Our partnership with the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services helped us source and process dozens of small requests from foster care organizations. Similar partnerships are at work in aiding homeless children through Texas Network of Youth Services, mental health through Mental Health America, and the possibilities are endless. Direct grants to some organizations still make sense, but these partnerships help quickly source quality small grants, provide valuable technical assistance, and strengthen the value of existing collaboration. A number of these are Texas organizations, but similar groups or affiliates may exist in your state or region. Asking organizations about what networks they were a part of helped source some of these partnerships.

Rural communities may also face resource and access issues. To counter this we have tried to restrict funding to specific underserved communities to incentivize service providers to cover these communities. For example, we might include funding for 5 counties and require that a minimum number of people are served in each county. We also explored ways to increase access to telehealth services, increase community engagement funding to get organizations on the ground in new areas, and different funding structures like 2x or 5x matches for under-resourced or overlooked communities to more equitably distribute funds in multi-region grants.

3. **Overestimate How Long Recovery Takes -** The vast majority of funding raised to respond to disasters is for the initial response. Many funders use the logic that they want the funding out as fast as possible to help as many people as possible. This makes a lot of sense. Unfortunately, this pressure to get money out quickly can have unintended consequences by pushing organizations to spend in ways that are fast but not sustainable or efficient. It doesn't allow organizations to properly triage needs. It also means that

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