

Learning from Sept. 11th: 22 Recommendations for Effective Disaster Relief

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What has 9/11 taught us about disaster relief? What does it say about how to respond to urban crises? Does the 9/11 relief effort offer any lessons at all?—or was it an episode so unique that it merits sympathy but not attention?

More than two years after the Sept. 11th terrorist attacks, we as a nation are still analyzing and absorbing its lessons. Numerous studies have been issued that have chronicled and analyzed the philanthropic and governmental response to 9/11; yet it is still not clear what practical lessons we are supposed to glean from this history.

The law firm of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP recently commissioned the authors to conduct an independent study to elucidate some of these practical lessons. The purpose of this effort was to examine a complex empirical record, review previous analyses, and begin identifying what worked and what didn't work.

The 22 recommendations that follow are extracted from that study. Intended to encourage further discussion and debate, they are managerial in focus and are addressed to all relief responders—funders, direct service agencies, government officials and individuals—rather than just one segment. Collectively, these recommendations make the point that effective relief is a product of many different factors. It depends as much on outreach as coordination, as much on administrative capacity as strategy, as much on definitions as actions. And it depends on meaningful leadership at all levels.

The full report, "The Philanthropic Response to 9/11: A Practical Analysis and Recommendations," can be downloaded at www.simpsonthacher.com/practice_exemptOrg.htm. (The report and its recommendations are solely the work of the authors and do not reflect the views of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, or of any member or employee of the firm. As a matter of record, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP has provided pro bono legal counsel to several 9/11-responder organizations, including Safe Horizon and The Robin Hood Foundation.)

THE 22 RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategy and Speed

1. Take the time to reevaluate your mission and strategy in the context of the emergency

Assemble managers, leaders and board members early on to make decisions about your organization's method and approach. Pay particular attention to how the challenges of the disaster relate to your mission and competencies and do not wait for others to act before mobilizing your response. To stimulate quick action and encourage accountability, assign responsibilities for carrying out the relief effort to specific people as soon as possible.

2. Respond in a manner commensurate with your strengths and experience

Devise programs and take actions that make the most of your organization's natural skills and resources. Don't waste your time expanding into areas where your organization lacks critical knowledge or support. Likewise, don't feel compelled to act in a disaster if you have little to offer. Make your decision to focus on particular areas clear in all communications (to the public, media, and other organizations).

Categories of Need

3. Assert public leadership in the definition of needs and victims

Provide public leadership about who needs help and what kind of help is needed. Encourage other organizations to keep their definitions of needs and victims broad enough to be inclusive and focused enough to be meaningful. Call attention to the specific limitations and shortcomings of other definitions. Provide direct feedback about the kind of government leadership that is required throughout the relief effort.

4. Design and implement relief based upon specific categories of victim needs

Examine the different ways people have been affected and tailor your relief services to fit the specific categories of need presented by the disaster at hand (as opposed to trying to make victims fit into categories of need from previous disasters). Anticipate certain categories of need in advance but conduct the actual needs assessment in real time. (For example, after 9/11 some of the big new categories of need were trauma treatment and employment assistance. In another disaster, major categories of need might include medical care, access to fresh water and housing.) Distinguish between emergency and continuing needs, but don't get caught up in the idea of waiting for undefined long-term needs to manifest themselves before acting.

5. Use quick innovation to stimulate action by larger players

Take advantage of whatever flexibility your organization has to test new programs and methods of meeting peoples' needs. Quickly put into place seed programs, bridge funding and beta tests with the goal of identifying plausible solutions. Refute the idea that traditional conditions have to be met before organizations can act. Curtail or retool failed programs expeditiously. Share your successes and failures with other players who are addressing similar needs and encourage them to take risks.

6. When possible, partner with established service providers

Maintain constant contact with organizations that have pre-established connections with victim populations. Delegate responsibility, including the ability to give cash assistance, to people and groups on the frontlines of service delivery. Before you decide to create a new outreach channel or vehicle, make sure that existing organizations cannot serve this purpose better.

7. Ensure that newly created organizations are adaptable

When creating new organizations and writing foundational documents, make sure that the stated missions and legal purposes are broad enough to adapt to fast-changing circumstances. Set up an exit strategy and method of dissolution from the beginning.

Outreach

8. Tailor your outreach to specific victim categories

Do not use the same outreach strategies for different types of victims. Take stock of who is and who isn't accessing your services. Regularly incorporate feedback from clients and would-be clients. Diversify channels. Commit yourself to serving a limited number of victim categories more thoroughly rather than a wide range of categories superficially.

9. Assume access to assistance is impeded and work constantly to improve it

Don't conclude that you are reaching victims adequately just because you are busy or your services are in high demand. Don't measure your performance solely on what you're doing; consider as well what you're not doing. Check your own assessments and perspectives against those of local community-based organizations and other responders with strong outreach capacity. Don't station police, military or immigration personnel in front of facilities if you are trying to serve undocumented aliens. Use civilians or non-uniformed officers to protect victims from photographers or curiosity-seekers.

Planning coordination

10. Create a flexible framework for coordination ahead of time

Use loose councils and existing coordination vehicles (e.g., VOAD committees or grantmaker associations) to meet peers and counterparts. Convene regularly to explore potential collaborations and divisions of labor in the event of future crises. Apply the benefits of this information sharing to your day-to-day efforts as well.

11. Minimize operational obstacles to coordination well in advance

Resolve inconsistencies in privacy guidelines and intake forms in advance. Establish working groups to synchronize systems. Develop formal agreements with government agencies and other organizations to facilitate coordination before a disaster occurs.

12. Ensure accurate representation in formal coordination efforts

Pull small agencies and CBO's into coordination meetings run or dominated by larger players, including any meetings convened by FEMA for the purpose of coordinating future relief responses. Use their perspectives and expertise to ensure that major programs meet the needs of different constituencies. For the sake of efficiency, focus on representing points of view rather than inviting every possible agency. Don't waste political capital by holding meetings with no agenda.

Managing coordination during a disaster

13. Exercise convening power early and judiciously after a disaster

Use whatever source of convening power you have (size, funding ability, political power, moral authority or individual leadership) to capture the attention and cooperation of others. Bring people and organizations together by meeting around a specific cause (e.g., the need for trauma treatment). Encourage coordination at lateral levels, rather than focusing solely on leaders or proxies. Don't leave instigation of meetings to only the largest, most obvious players. At the same time, follow the lead of those who have domain expertise. Don't assert independence for its own sake.

14. Use physical co-location to encourage day-to-day informal coordination

Ensure that a variety of relief agencies and personnel are housed in any centralized or satellite relief centers. Consider lending staff members to other organizations so that they can share their expertise and bring information back to your organization. Encourage co-location by government agencies to resolve jurisdictional issues and eliminate programmatic gaps.

15. Strengthen the capabilities of service coordinators and information brokers

Make deliberate efforts to inform and support people within organizations who understand the greater landscape of relief rather than just waiting for them to emerge on their own. Funnel information to these people and empower them to be problem solvers. Enable your staff to assist victims in obtaining aid from other organizations.

16. Help government agencies improve their effectiveness

Work to make the most of existing government programs while lobbying for more responsive ones. Initiate conversations with FEMA and other special agencies to apprise them of your greatest needs and challenges. Help government agencies reach your constituents. Offer to take the lead in areas or aspects that are not well suited to government leadership (e.g., dealing with immigrants or creating a database of clients).

Building capacity

17. Attend to deficiencies in administrative capacity

Funders: Consider ways to help service organizations develop better capacity, such as improving computer networks and skills training. Take a leadership role vis-à-vis other funding organizations and government agencies by articulating the benefits of capacity investments.

Service organizations: Call for investments to build solid systems and good management. Draw clear links between better administrative capacity and better service. Show nonprofit and government funders the difficulties of achieving

ambitious goals with lousy telephones, old computers, clunky databases, and overleveraged personnel.

18. Participate in sector-wide skills training efforts.

Congregate with other relief responders to identify common training needs and create means of addressing them. Work with third-party entities to make their training sessions applicable to your needs. Look for ways to integrate training into the daily activities of your organization rather than always treating it as a stand-alone function.

19. Devote resources to incorporating volunteers, maximizing corporate involvement and using in-kind services

Set up clear systems to train and direct volunteers quickly and meaningfully. Make the most of other agencies' volunteer-training and lending programs. Use your volunteer base as a way to strengthen ties to the community. Develop relationships with corporations and urge board members to deepen such relationships. Brainstorm ways to incorporate in-kind services as well as cash grants. When requesting in-kind donations (e.g., blood or volunteer labor), make sure that you have the capacity to absorb them.

Leadership

20. Work toward transparency

Philanthropies and large charities: Share information with other agencies early on. Publicly report the results of fundraising and spending (e.g., by posting receipts and grants on your website). Publicly articulate your mission and philosophy as well as the aims and results of specific programs.

Service agencies: Build in accountability systems to improve program effectiveness and managerial competence. Be open about your challenges with funders as a means of mobilizing resources to better fulfill your mission.

21. Take responsibility for public education

Proactively communicate the work of your organization to your constituents, the media and the public, assigning responsibility for this task to a particular person or team within your organization. Focus on public education rather than public relations. Don't justify inaction on the premise that "a charity or government agency doing its job isn't a story."

22. Step into your power

Understand your value vis-à-vis other players. Don't seek to be all things to all people. Look beyond your organization and be proactive in asserting the needs of your constituents. Don't wait for permission before asserting leadership.