

# How Grant Makers Can Improve Their Aid After Disaster Strikes

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The Salvation Army USA

A canteen in Baton Rouge feeds residents impacted by recent historic flooding. The Salvation Army has served over 130,000 meals from 27 mobile feeding trucks and canteens in Southern Louisiana.

Sandbags, wool blankets, and gymnasiums filled with displaced families in Louisiana, West Virginia, and California. Candles, flowers, and blood drives in Orlando and Dallas. Bottled water and canned food in Flint, Mich.

These are the lasting images of recent catastrophes across our country. They leave an indelible mark on our collective conscience and, in so doing, reinforce our notions of what is needed most in the aftermath of a disaster. Sandbags, blood drives, and bottled water are critically important. But it's crucial that donors understand that these items represent just a fraction of what communities need as they recover from crises. This reality is hardly new, yet many donors are unaware of the truly innovative and meaningful options to build longer-term resiliency for communities before, during, and after disasters.

We're trying to change that.

Two years ago the Rita Allen Foundation and the Council of New Jersey Grantmakers came together to share ideas about disaster relief and strategies for effective recovery.

Only after Hurricane Sandy, when grant makers across the country looked to the council for guidance, did we fully recognize the important role all types of foundations have to play in a disaster. We turned to the many innovative approaches deployed by our colleagues throughout the foundation world to identify what works.

Armed with this knowledge, we teamed with the Center for Disaster Philanthropy to create a [disaster philanthropy playbook](#) — a comprehensive online resource for grant makers, nonprofits, governments, and donors to help communities prepare for and recover from disasters in more well-rounded ways and build resilience for the future.

The key thing we've learned is that a community's ability to overcome a disaster is influenced less by economic status, the severity of the damage, or the aid it receives than by the strength of its social and institutional connections.

## Boosting Services

Much like a robust system of dunes or levees can reduce the physical impact of a hurricane, strong neighborhood centers, vibrant parent-teacher organizations, and nimble health-care networks mitigate the damage to a community's fabric. These resources provide a host of benefits any time, but their true power is magnified in a crisis.

Examples abound:

- After the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, the [Oklahoma City Community Foundation and United Way of Oklahoma City](#) coordinated philanthropy-driven, long-term community counseling that was critical to keeping young people engaged and in school.
- Following the I-35W bridge collapse in 2007, the Minneapolis Foundation pulled together the interagency Long Term Recovery Committee, which coordinated community resources among social-service organizations and helped numerous survivors reach a point of stability. That approach is now a nationwide model for building and sustaining community resiliency.

In these examples and others, the most effective philanthropic response has been support to strengthen institutions before, during, and after a disaster. But they also reveal a second important finding: Donors no longer must choose between short-term help (sandbags) and long-term support (a grant to the local library).

For instance, after Hurricane Irene, the Vermont Community Foundation quickly identified the needs of farms and mobile-home parks and within 10 days of the storm began to make direct grants that helped stanch losses in the state's critical agriculture sector and assisted mobile-home owners with the demolition and removal of destroyed homes.

Astonishingly, if a home has a hitch, it is not eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency support. The impact on mobile homes is rarely top of mind for foundations when a disaster strikes, but the Irene example emphasizes the need to consider blind spots and corresponding solutions.

## Voting After a Disaster

After Hurricane Sandy destroyed or damaged 37,000 homes and left 2.7 million people without power, the Rita Allen Foundation saw an opportunity to help ensure that everyone could vote even though the storm hit one week before Election Day, leaving 3.5 million without polling places.

Working with the Pew Charitable Trusts' Voting Information Project, the Rita Allen Foundation helped nearly a

quarter of a million voters in New York and New Jersey use wireless apps to find their new polling stations.

In the disaster-planning process, in the chaotic aftermath of a disaster, and in the complex, long-term recovery, organizations separated by thousands of miles can learn from one another's experiences and use them to better prepare for the next crisis.

Together we can strengthen our ability to face the future — whatever it brings.

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