

Summary: Post-Sandy Funder Briefing--Series I

Funder Briefing: #13

Date: February 25, 2013

Topic: Lessons from Hurricane Irene: Vermont Community Foundation

Speaker: Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup, President - Vermont Community Foundation

HIGHLIGHTS

Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup - [Vermont Community Foundation](#) (VCF)

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, VCF took on a leadership role to provide technical assistance and resources to populations in need, many of whom were overlooked or ineligible for federal and state dollars.

VCF had emergency plans for their organization and their immediate services area prior to Irene, but they hadn't planned for widespread disaster in the state. After the storm subsided, VCF set to work on collecting information from social media to assess the areas in greatest need, but there were parts of Vermont that people simply couldn't get to for needs assessments because road access was completely cut off.

As federal and state dollars started to come into Vermont, VCF focused its granting work on:

- Farm disaster recovery - agriculture is a huge part of VT's economy but aren't considered small businesses and don't have access to other small business relief funds
 - Farm Program launched within a week with first grants out within 10 days of disaster.
- Flood damage relief for nonprofit organizations to enable the organizations to serve populations in need
 - No large scale statewide opportunity existed for people to donate to damaged nonprofits
 - VCF already had a "Special Emergent Needs" fund - small grants for emergencies \$5K. They took that structure and expanded it, and were able to launch quickly.
 - The initial 3-4 months grants were focused only on helping with physical damage. Then VCF started to see a strong need to support nonprofits who weren't themselves damaged, but who needed to build capacity very quickly to respond to communities that were struggling. Those organizations needed staff, case managers, and to meet higher stocking needs at food pantries.
- Mobile home residents were disproportionately affected (700 families displaced) because mobile home parks are often in less "desirable" locations, often in valleys and in flood plains. Mobile homes were considered "temporary housing" so didn't have the same kind of access to full reimbursement from FEMA even when the trailer was totally destroyed. Other barriers included general distrust of government and difficulty negotiating relief efforts. Mobile Home fund took about three weeks to launch.
 - A documentary film was created about this: "Strength of the Storm" - [watch the trailer](#).

Lessons Learned:

- VCF donations collected were given fee-free to the community foundation: 100% of donations received were granted out. It was the right moral decision but VCF should have held back some funds to support its own expenses.

- Working with networks – donors, grant programs, businesses, etc. - is essential. VCF had a food and farm funders' network, which was activated in short order to help with the agricultural community. VCF worked cooperatively with [FEMA](#), [VT 211](#), [Red Cross](#), [VT VOAD](#), and State government in order to effectively participate in relief and recovery efforts. Also built successful relationships with new organizations.
- Flexibility and a willingness to work in an uncomfortable space: The aftermath of Sandy was the first time VCF did online giving and small donation amounts, the first time they produced events like concerts, golfing and benefits, etc. VCF expanded its leadership capacity and profile in the state because of its flexibility.
 - \$4.2 million was raised: Farm disaster relief was about \$2M. \$800K came from one anonymous donor, but VCF also accepted bags of change collected by children, lemonade stand donations - however the money came in.
- Transparency: created a website to track the donations coming in and where the money was going which built trust with both donors and grantees: www.VTFloodResponse.org
- Where access to resources/affluence/networks exist, communities can take quick action: Recovery Waterbury did a good job at mobilizing, Deerfield Valley had a strong network of second home owners that were able to organize access to resources very quickly. Low-income communities had to start from scratch
- Meeting with residents is something that community foundations are not used to doing but is essential

What to change before the next disaster:

- Policy: FEMA will only provide grants to rebuild the infrastructure to the level that existed pre-disaster. Roads and bridges need to be rebuilt to better standards, and has led to a significant policy battle with FEMA and government.
- Future resiliency: Create grant programs committed to farmers and affordable housing. Focus on energy policy; Agro-resiliency work with University of Vermont
- Mobile home parks are privately owned and can't just pick up and move. Fix issues around mobile home vs. stick built home eligibility and the financing mechanism/options for mobile homes (right now prospective mobile home owners can only get consumer loans, and are essentially forced to pay by credit)
- Research of cottage homes that would be cost comparable to mobile homes - located in less vulnerable places
- VCF has determined that it is essential to aligning their investment with their grantmaking, even though they may take a hit on their investment returns, and be turning away from highest return they could get.

Focus of work 18-months out:

- VCF is working to align their investments and grant programs
- Working closely with VT Long Term Recovery Group to help redirect donations to them: [Vermont Disaster Relief Fund](#)
- Participating in leadership efforts about resiliency and climate change work
- Farming support: Availability of feed for livestock became a huge issue, as most farmers couldn't use the harvest and those who could found lowered nutritional value and needed more feed to compensate.
- Mobile home residents project: zero attention was paid to the housing needs of this population, where were often very stable, often multigenerational neighborhoods with capital.

Beginning on the first Monday after Hurricane Sandy struck New Jersey, The Council of New Jersey Grantmakers began hosting weekly conference calls for grantmakers in-state and nationwide, facilitated by CNJG President Nina Stack, to discuss their response to Sandy and strategies facing NJ as a result of the storm. Each conference call briefing offered expert guest speakers who represented government agencies (FEMA, HUD, HHS, etc.), national philanthropic leaders, expert psychologists with experience in PTSD, planners and community redevelopment leaders, and representatives from NJ's Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, among others. The twenty-five audio files and written summaries are available at: <http://cnjg.org/hurricane-sandy>