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Review of 9/11 Response Finds Charities Missed Opportunity to Lead

By Debra Blum

Organizations responding to major disasters must be willing to share information and assert leadership, according to a new report that reviews the relief efforts following the September 11 terrorist attacks with an eye toward improving services after other national crises. Among its 22 recommendations: Charities should use whatever source of power they possess (size, financial clout, political influence, moral authority, or a persuasive individual leader) to capture the attention and cooperation of others.

The report was commissioned by the law firm Simpson Thacher & Bartlett, in New York, which has provided free legal counsel to nonprofit groups that joined the September 11 relief efforts and to families of victims of the attacks. The 42-page document was written by Michael F. Melcher and Alex Mandl, independent consultants in New York.

The report suggested, for example, that relief groups meet regularly to discuss collaboration and division of labor during crises, and to identify common training needs and create means to fill them. During a crisis, the report said, groups should take actions that make the most of their natural skills and resources, not expand into new areas of support. "Likewise," the report told charities, "don't feel compelled to act in a disaster if you have little to offer."

Leadership Void

The report focused much of its criticism of the September 11 response on what it described as a leadership vacuum. "No one was running the show, but everyone was free to contribute," it said.

Families of people killed in the terrorist attacks would have been better served if one disaster-relief organization had taken a leadership role in coordinating the response.

The most obvious candidates for such leadership, according to the report: the American Red Cross and the September 11th Fund.

The Red Cross, the report said, torpedoed efforts to create a centralized victims' database after raising concerns about privacy, thus missing an opportunity to lead coordination through information sharing.

And the September 11th Fund spent so much time figuring out its own niche, the report said, that it paid limited attention to the disaster response as a whole.

"The likely truth is that both potential leaders and potential followers underestimated the value of leadership," the report said. A costly mistake, according to the report, since effective coordination of efforts not only could have made services better and more widely available, but also could have improved the reputation of disaster-relief organizations.

22 Recommendations

Among the report's specific criticisms of the September 11 relief effort:

- | The Federal Emergency Management Agency, Red Cross, and Salvation Army -- each used to working on natural disasters characterized by extensive physical damage but short-term economic harm -- "to a large degree imported this 'tents and flashlights' paradigm to their New York relief efforts despite the different needs created by 9/11 and the urban nature of the catastrophe."
- | Asociación Tepeyac, a charity that works largely with Hispanics who do not have citizenship, "reported that other organizations like the Red Cross and Safe Horizon frequently offered them training (which they did not need) rather than money (which they did need)."
- | Some organizations "evaluated strategy but made assessment a lengthy process that superceded fast action." For example, the report said the September 11th Fund held its first board meeting on November 1; it "delayed making most decisions until after the board met and many of its services were not rolled out for months." But Carol Kellermann, the September 11th Fund's executive director, told *The Chronicle* that such criticism was "outrageous." She said the charity was offering cash and other kinds of assistance to the families of victims within two weeks of the tragedy. And, she said, even while longer-range plans were being formulated in the earliest days, if major policy decisions had been made before the first board meeting, the group would have been criticized for not deliberating enough or consulting with its board.

The report did point to positive illustrations of relief work, too. The "clearest example of optimal partnering," according to the report, was the decision by the September 11th Fund and others to hire Safe Horizon, a New York charity that assists crime victims, to take the lead in caring for people who sought help at Pier 94, the relief center set up on the Hudson River.

The report holds up the Robin Hood Foundation, in New York, as an example of an organization that moved quickly and thoughtfully in responding to the crisis. At an emergency board meeting, the organization decided that it would focus on helping low-income people affected by the attacks, and named board members to a special September 11 allocation committee responsible for making grants. The report said that Robin Hood had earlier deflected pressure to start a direct relief effort. "We work in poverty relief, not disasters," the report quoted a Robin Hood official as saying.

Text of the full report, "The Philanthropic Response to 9/11: A Practical Analysis and Recommendations," is available on Simpson Thacher's Web site at http://www.simpsonthacher.com/practice_exemptOrg.htm. Free printed copies of the report are also available from Simpson Thacher by calling (212) 455-2000.

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