



Oklahoma City

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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Lessons Learned for Charities from the Oklahoma City Bombing

In April 1995, the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City represented the most devastating terrorist attack, at that time, on American soil with 168 deaths and more than 600 others injured. More than \$40 million was contributed by individuals and organizations across the country to at least 70 different funds in Oklahoma City to assist those who were affected by the bombing.

A group of the major charities, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Way, Oklahoma City Community Foundation, several church social service organizations and community mental health organizations, were the recipients of a majority of these funds and worked directly with the individuals and families affected. A number of independent funds, sponsored by civic groups, financial institutions, professional organizations and others also received significant contributions through their contacts and networks around the country but did not have either the staff or process in place to work directly with individuals to determine needs.

The current situation in New York City is much larger in terms of total size but not much different in relationship to the size of the population base and for the number of deaths involved in the tragedy. Events in the tragedy are unfolding in a very similar way: a chaotic response driven by the flood of charitable contributions, charities struggling to services in place which will help people affected, concerns about coordination, duplication, fraud and frustrating bureaucracy, a high level of media attention to the flow of funds and questions how they are or are not utilized, the misunderstanding and anger which flows from individuals about the process of receiving assistance, and the perception that someone should be “in charge” of a disjointed system of independent, basically unregulated charities that generally receive very little scrutiny. The extreme emotional trauma related to the loss of life is the force that drives the process, both for the individual case and for the larger community. How individuals and families respond to these events and work through that trauma will be reflected in the charitable activities and process which come from the events. Since anger is part of the grieving process, the charities and the community should expect that anger and frustration will occur and probably be directed at them.

The group of charities that faced similar challenges after the Oklahoma City bombing learned some lessons that could be helpful to New York. We are not wiser, just battle-scared: we have already made many of the mistakes which await you. We are not smarter, we just have the benefit of seeing the effect of what we did. We have been asked the technical questions: how to set up a data base information system; what criteria to use for mental health services. But the bigger question is what did you really learn that would help New York or any other city?

Before that question is answered, the situation must be put in some context. First, no organization, even the American Red Cross, has significant experience dealing with the large numbers of tragic deaths, the emotional issues, the media attention and the administrative challenges of millions of dollars created by situations like those in New York and Oklahoma City. No organization has practiced, trained for, planned for, or even expects this type of situation to happen. Second, there is no formula or policy that balances the tension between equity and needs in the use of funds. The tensions that develop around the distribution of money are significant,

and there are a variety of expectations, most of which are not developed in the context of the rules of the I.R.S., or an understanding of limitations of money in the healing process. Third, the funds that charities have are not compensation funds, or court settlement funds or insurance payments. They are charitable contributions given by thousands of individuals who want to help those affected and want the charities to be good stewards of those funds. For most donors, these gifts are their individual efforts “to help,” the only way that most have to provide any assistance.

What then are the lessons which were learned in Oklahoma City? First, money is limited in its effect and must be coupled with services and be used with the goal of helping people survive and go forward with their lives. The focus on the total amount collected and the expectations about its distribution often detract from the central purpose of the funds, which is to help the recovery process. The effectiveness of the charitable effort will not be measured in whether the money was divided and distributed, but whether the people who need assistance receive the services they need and are able to move forward with their lives. We have too many instances in Oklahoma City where funds were given to families with no additional services and later, the helping agencies were called back in and to provide counseling, coordination and financial assistance. Money itself does not provide healing or encouragement in the recovery process.

Second, the individuals and families that are being helped are very distressed people and even with the best assistance and support, they will not be happy, nor should we expect them to immediately forget their loss. People who work at charities receive a lot of satisfaction from helping individuals and seeing results. Because the grieving process is a long and very emotional road, the effort to help does not produce individuals and families who feel satisfied or appreciative, at least for a long time. It is very easy for the media to find unhappy or frustrated people and to assume that charities have not done their jobs. Expect anger, complaints, and criticism and help your employees understand that it is part of the process of grieving. Continue doing your work.

Third, cooperate, cooperate, cooperate. Work with other agencies and service providers and funds as much as possible. The individuals whom you are trying to help should not have to navigate through different bureaucracies and understand issues of charitable turf. Don't worry about who will get the credit or the criticism. In Oklahoma City, the charities cooperated from the beginning because we knew that the task was too big for any one group, and that we had to work together to deal with the size of challenge. Maybe that realization came from dealing with too many tornadoes over the years. In any case, cooperation was the expectation of the larger agencies and most of the funds and smaller organizations accepted the standard. Because we had worked together so much, when criticism of one agency appeared in the media, the whole group of cooperating charities and funds were quick to provide support. Our individual efforts really were viewed as part of the community's effort. We got more done as a team than individual groups.

For many people, the effort at recovery will take a long time and thus, the assistance of the charities will necessarily be long-term. We are still working with a number of cases in Oklahoma City that require special efforts for the families to recover. Accountability to the public and to donors is extremely important and reporting on expenditures should be part of the stewardship to build trust for future situations. The I.R.S. has rules related to the distribution of funds to individuals that need to be considered by any qualified charity. These rules are not well known but have an enormous impact in these situations.

Lastly, we avoid using the term “victim” to describe those who are affected by the tragedy. A Salvation Army Major and veteran of many natural disasters said, “The only victims are those who died; everyone else is a survivor.” And truly, “survivor” does put emphasis on the need to look forward and not to dwell on what happened. Avoid creating a “victim” mentality among those who are receiving assistance. Charities cannot do anything about the tragedy, but they can begin to help individuals look to the future and restore their lives. We cannot begin to compensate anyone for their loss. All we can do is help those who really do wish to be survivors.