

Remarks to the NY State Assembly Hearing, November 7, 2001
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The bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April, 1995 killed 168 individuals including 19 children. There were approximately 600 injured including 83 which were admitted to the hospital. It is estimated that about 3000 individuals were directly affected as family members of those who were killed, those who were injured, those who worked in the Murrah Building or one of the five other buildings which were seriously damaged by the explosion or lived in apartments in the area which were damaged or destroyed. An additional 3000 individuals were received some type of assistance because of economic impact or mental health needs.

Approximately 40 charitable organizations and independently established funds solicited or received contributions to help those who were affected by the bombing. Additionally at least 30 other funds were established for individual families or small groups. Approximately \$40 million in charitable contributions was received by these organizations and independent funds. The local chapter of the American Red Cross received the largest amount, about \$18 million, and the 15 different funds at the Oklahoma City Community Foundation, including the Mayors Fund and the Governors Fund, received about \$14 million. Other significant charities involved were the United Way, the Salvation Army, Feed the Children, and several church social service organizations. These ten or so larger and staffed charities worked in a very cooperative manner to deal with the needs of individuals related to the bombing.

The cooperative efforts in Oklahoma City had three main goals;

First, to provide effective services to the primary target group: the families of those who were killed and those who had critical injuries

Second to make the system as efficient as possible: to keep individuals who needed help from having to deal with multiple agencies, to prevent duplication, to discourage fraud, and to insure that everyone who needed assistance was provided an opportunity to receive it.

Third, to be accountable to the donors and to the public for the expenditures of funds and to insure the public that funds were used for the purposes intended.

The system which eventually developed in Oklahoma City worked well in meeting those goals but what we actually wound up doing developed over a three to six month period of time. We did not sit down one afternoon and design the cooperative arrangements but tried a variety of things, continued what worked and discarded what didn't. The system had three main elements, all of which were extremely important to the goal of providing services which were effective, efficient and accountable:

First:

The database which was primarily a registry of the family members of those who were killed, injured, or in the affected buildings. Eventually it contained the names of most who had received any significant assistance. It was operated by the United Way and each of the 40 primary agencies providing direct service had a terminal with a direct link

Second

Each family where there was death or critical injured had a case manager, a social work professional or trained and experienced volunteer who worked with the family to review all the needs and resources which might be available to them, to help them get financial, legal and mental health services needed, and to serve as an advocate for that family with any other agency or fund which might assist them. Because of the data base and the case manager system, most families had to complete basic information request forms at only one organization.

Third

The unmet needs committee was established about seven weeks after the bombing. The case managers and helping agencies would bring needs of individuals and families which had not been met to the committee which also included independent funds operated by civic groups and others with no staff. Large financial needs such as uninsured hospital bills, assistance with automobiles and housing modifications needed were addressed by this group. The committee met weekly for more than two years and continued for almost six.

This system was fully functional within four months after the bombing and most elements of the system continued for more than five years. Currently there are two primary service providers, the Oklahoma City Community Foundation and the American Red Cross, and approximately 30-50 active cases. Most of the still-active cases related to families with serious injuries, families with living arrangements for surviving children which need to be supported and individuals with serious mental health needs. Services are as important as financial assistance for most of these long-term cases.

I would like to make three comments to you related to what we learned in Oklahoma City. These comments are not based on any prior wisdom but simply the experience of seeing what works and what doesn't and having seen a process go through the long-term. These observations could not have been made three months or six months out because we really had no idea what would eventually happen in the chaos and emotional intensity of those first few months.

First, the problem which the charities are addressing is really not one of distributing money but helping people restore their lives. Charities don't divide money up, they help people. The process of both grieving and moving forward is slow, requires patience and support and is different for every family. The helping agencies involved in this process are the best organizations in the community to provide the services which are needed by individuals. Many of the issues which we addressed in Oklahoma City with families did not appear until six months or a year out. This is a long-term process and it should be focused on the ultimate goal of helping people move forward, not the short term division of funds. It is much easier to divide and distribute money than it is to help people recover from tragedy.

Second, the coordination of services was and the cooperation of organization, all of which was completely voluntary in Oklahoma City, was absolutely essential to our efforts and to maximizing the assistance which was given while minimizing the bureaucratic hassle for the families. Cooperate, Cooperate Cooperate, Don't worry about who has the money or who gets the credit. Don't make families have to navigate turf issues between organizations. Make it as easy as possible for them to receive services, not just money. A helpful case worker can ease the anxiety and relieve frustration of many in the near-term and help people focus on going forward.

Third, all of these families are in the grieving process and anger is a significant stage of that process. Don't expect that people will be happy or satisfied with what is happening because they are very emotionally distraught and angry and upset about what has happened to them, and they have every right to be so. Politicians and media representatives should be very careful in their criticism of charities based on the anger and frustration of the families of victims. Our experience in Oklahoma City was that it took almost a year for most families to work through that process. It is very easy to find families who have not received what they think that they should, especially when their expectations of money are raised by continual media stories and attention to some grand total of what has been contributed. In Oklahoma City, charities had to continually focus on the services they were trying to provide and continually state the message they were trying to help people move forward. The examination and review process should look at what the charities have really done, and ultimately whether individuals they helped have been able to move forward to live their lives in some independent way.

Conclude with an important perspective that was very helpful to our organization:
Survivor vs. Victim story.