

A Summary of
United Way Local Involvement
in Florida Disaster Work
2004 and 2005

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September 2006

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In September of 2005 United Way of Florida hired a statewide long-term recovery coordinator to help local United Ways address storm recovery from the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes throughout the state. The goals of the coordinator were to:

- **Establish a pro-active United Way of Florida presence** with statewide long-term recovery organizations in order to gain knowledge about disaster recovery resources available for local United Way service, and to follow through on United Way's National VOAD membership at the state level in Florida
- **Establish working relationships with local Florida United Ways** who have a long-term recovery coordinator in order to support them with disaster information and resources, as well as to create opportunities for networking and encouragement
- **Strengthen relationships/ partnerships with local, regional and state entities** for sustainability of future United Way involvement with disaster-related activities

These goals were met, as evidenced by the following measurements. Over 12 months, the statewide coordinator:

- **Established strong relationships with statewide disaster and related partners**, bringing a United Way voice to their activities in order to demonstrate United Way's commitment to the recovery process, as well as to obtain a greater understanding of disaster work and resources that can be passed on to local coordinators
- **Connected United Ways with information and resources** for emergency 211/ I&R services, ESF15 activities, affordable housing initiatives, disaster grants, mitigation programs, and other recovery resources by participating in more than three dozen workshops, conferences, training or statewide meetings; by participating in over 100 disaster conference calls hosted by FIND (Florida's active VOAD entity), United Way of America or other disaster groups; and by assisting the NFL Draft Program to successfully connect volunteers with long-term recovery groups in Florida
- **Worked closely with United Way LTR coordinators in 26 Florida communities** by visiting with or calling them to discuss the development of long-term recovery groups and UW participation in recovery efforts; set up an e-group for easy communication between these members; assisted several United Ways to obtain UWA HRRF Phase II grants; and obtained a Phase II Grant to continue this vital work for a second year
- **Got involved with statewide or regional disaster activities** by presenting lessons learned regarding 211 and EOC MOUs at the annual statewide FLAIRS conference; assisting in the development of an unprecedented FEMA reimbursement for mass care of evacuees (Katrina and Rita); assisting in the development and presentation of the first statewide affordable housing disaster workshop; in the development and implementation of the first multi-state Gulf Disaster Recovery Symposium; creating the first disaster tracks at Florida's bi-annual United Way training conference; and presenting at the Georgia United Ways Disaster Preparedness Conference in Augusta

Florida United Ways and the Hurricanes of 2004 and 2005

What Happened

Because each Florida United Way is a separate and unique organization, disaster roles were chosen based upon the needs found in their respective communities.

Preparation Activities

To help their communities prepare for hurricane season, United Ways:

- Conducted pre-season community education events
- Assisted partner agencies to write continuity of operations plans
- Funded the publication of Spanish hurricane guides
- Trained staff and volunteers to manage disaster supply distribution sites and work in emergency operations center ESF seats
- Built strong relationships with emergency managers and other community leaders.

All of these activities helped to strengthen the local fabric of preparation for hurricanes in Florida.

Response Activities

In the areas where the United Way's community had not been directly impacted, these United Ways looked for ways to help and support impacted communities. In directly impacted communities, United Ways chose one or more of the following activities:

- As lead or support agencies for ESF11-- emergency water and ice distribution
- As lead or support agencies for ESF15-- the management of unsolicited volunteers and donations
- Assisting partner agencies to speak with potential clients in the Disaster Recovery Centers, beginning the case management process or helping individuals to apply for FEMA or SBA funds
- Offering staff and volunteers to assist in response activities such as debris removal or delivering food to homebound vulnerable populations
- Helping to coordinate community-wide relief or assessment efforts
- Managing disaster funds that come into their coffers through donations, grants and special fundraising efforts
- Continuing their work to support their partner agencies through normal campaign and allocation processes

In general Florida United Ways were willing to jump into the mix wherever they saw a need, using their pre-disaster relationships to bring necessary resources to the effort.

Recovery Activities

As of April 2006 there are 44 active disaster recovery or VOAD groups in Florida.¹ United Way is actively engaged with at least 37 of these, in one or more of the following capacities:

¹ Church World Service "Recovery Yellow Pages," 4/18/06 edition

- As a leader on the executive committee of the organization, often convening a new group or VOAD
- As the fiscal agent for the organization
- By funding an LTR coordinator or other position within the organization
- By becoming an integrated part of the disaster funds allocation process
- By offering staff support for various activities such as grant writing or administration of collaborative funding with other organizations/ agencies
- By allowing the LTR group to operate out of United Way offices using United Way equipment
- By sending staff to attend meetings and to help collaborate on behalf of unmet needs
- By advocating for the needs of the LTR group as they serve the community

Results

In the 2004 and 2005 Florida hurricane seasons, local United Ways:

- Demonstrated excellent leadership and strong community networking
- Used traditional partners to help create focused response activities
- Initiated recovery activities in some communities by convening human services organizations for assessment and unmet needs
- Supported community action groups either financially or with in-kind offerings of staff, space, equipment and contacts
- Were able to focus services due to pre-existing community impact models
- Were integrated into disaster services due to ties with 211/ I&R services and local volunteer centers
- Offered valuable links to political and other governmental allies
- Were able to help each other-- non-impacted communities helping impacted communities

Effectiveness

In communities where United Way had strong pre-storm partners and relationships, their effectiveness was maximized. Following are some of the ways in which Florida United Ways integrated themselves into disaster activities. *Bold type statements indicate effectiveness in 2004 and 2005.*

United Ways and 211/ I&R Services in Disaster

There are fourteen 211 services in Florida, six of which are operated by a local United Way; the remainder are financially supported by United Way. Additionally there are six First Call for Help I&R services, all but one of which is operated by United Way.²

Excellent relationships between 211/ I&R services and their local emergency operations centers (often strengthened via MOUs) provided factual and helpful disaster information to callers before, during and after an incident.

² Florida 211 and I&R services, taken from FLAIRS 10/20/05 list

United Ways and Volunteerism in Disaster

The Volunteer Florida website lists 23 volunteer centers in the state, covering 34 of Florida's 67 counties.³ United Ways operate eight of these centers, and financially support nine others.

In Florida, the Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15 seat found in every county's emergency operations center deals with the management of unsolicited volunteers and donations in the weeks immediately following a disaster, while the ESF11 seat is responsible for directing the distribution of food, water and ice to shelters and/or local points of distribution, called PODs.

Of the 34 Florida United Ways, at least 13 are committed to be the lead or support agency for the ESF15 and/or ESF11 seats. For some, this means United Way staff set up a temporary VRC, donations warehouse or POD sites; for others it means working closely with local partners to coordinate incoming resources-- including unaffiliated volunteers-- with local needs. **These United Ways were able to offer a streamlined, effective system for managing disaster volunteers and donations.**

Often United Way involvement with local emergency management is multi-functioned. For example, while working out of the EOC as the lead agency for ESF 15, United Way of Palm Beach also filled the role of information liaison for 211 Palm Beach.

United Ways and Community Partners in Disaster

Successful United Ways maintain strong relationships with area business, partner agencies, local and regional government representatives, and through 211, with emergency management and 911 providers. **During disaster, these relationships enhanced United Way capacity to serve the afflicted community.**

During response and recovery phases, United Way's important relationships with organizations that by nature contain large human resources for volunteer work, such as the Scouts, special interest "clubs" or local congregations are critical. Along with faith-based partners, these are often the volunteers handing out water and ice, serving in the Red Cross shelters, or assisting victims in the Disaster Recovery Center.

As a community recovers it often needs expanded services in childcare, crisis counseling, literacy education, homeless shelters, transitional or affordable housing programs, household budget counseling, senior services, better living programs, financial assistance, mental health and addiction services, and employment training and placement programs. **United Way was able to bring additional disaster resources to these important partner agencies as they served the community.**

United Ways working with Long-term Recovery Organizations

As conveners of many long-term recovery (LTR) groups, United Way was able to help their community sort out questions requiring unique local answers. Issues common in emerging LTR groups:

³ Volunteer Florida website: www.volunteerflorida.org, 8/15/06

- The need to incorporate or not, and the impact it may have on local resources
- The need to coordinate differently to address unmet needs
- The need to collaborate on recovery case management with out violating confidentiality commitments
- The possible need to identify one database for client information
- The need to avoid duplication of benefits
- Financial and rebuild resources, including volunteers
- Organizational staff and supervision
- Liability issues for recovery work
- Inter-organizational trust and sharing

Leveraging Recovery Resources

Due to funding brought into a community through the local United Way, disaster work was amplified beyond the initial resources. United Way coordinators matched volunteer labor with funding for rebuild materials; leveraged disaster donations as match for new grants; combined state housing program resources with disaster resources in order to house displaced people; and brought together workforce resources, faith-based resources and United Way grant dollars to house Katrina evacuees. **United Way acted as both a catalyst and a collaborator to bring multiple-origin disaster resources to the recovery effort.**

Questions to Ask

How much can/ should an individual United Way do with regard to local disaster activities? This important question addresses both the capacity and the desire of a United Way, and brings to the table a list of issues to consider when planning for future involvement. The hard questions are:

1. What exactly is our overall mission? Are we leaving parts of it behind as we enter into disaster efforts? Is this a temporary situation, and is it OK? Did we make a specific decision to do this, or were we drawn into the mix without clarifying our potential role?
2. Have we examined our ability to participate in disaster response or recovery-- our available resources, personnel, workload, campaign schedule and community impact goals? Are we able to sustain the level of disaster work to which we've committed? Will we want to do the same thing the next time around, or will we more carefully choose our role?
3. Have we assessed the community with regard to the role that others play in disaster, so that we're not duplicating services? Are we filling a gap simply because we see it, or because we're the right organization to fill that gap? Could we alternatively support another organization to fill the gap, rather than do it ourselves? How much of what we do in disaster is based upon our ego or reputation, versus our true desire to be as effectively helpful as we can be?
4. Finally, how will we evaluate our involvement to see if we were effective, and if resources entrusted to us were used wisely? Could we select a more robust role in the future by using resources differently? Could we have served a broader community segment by channeling

resources through other organizations and their respective programs? Did we lead well? What, if anything, did our organization gain, at what cost?

Looking Ahead

Response Activities

State and local emergency managers are more clearly visualizing the important role of private non-profits in disaster work, and are beginning to welcome them into the response and recovery arena. United Ways will find a greater demand to become involved. Now-- in "peace time"-- we must decide what may be appropriate for our United Way. For more information about these emergency response activities, visit the United Way Knowledge Cafe online, or contact your state's disaster coordinator, who can put you in touch with fellow members with experience.

For United Ways desiring to assist sister United Ways across the nation, the Operation Caring Communities program (OCC) is structured to match "Champions" (presently unaffected communities) with "Beneficiaries" (presently affected communities) in need. OCC beneficiaries have requested a variety of assistance, from respiratory masks and insect repellent in the storm surged muddy towns of the coastal Gulf states, to help with childhood education programs for traumatized storm families. Managed at the national level, United Ways that want to offer help and those needing help should contact the national director of this program in Alexandria.

Recovery Activities

Even though each community must choose their own unique path through the formative process of developing an LTRO, there are dozens of models in Florida that provide exemplary templates for success. The statewide long-term recovery coordinator is well acquainted with these organizations, and can share examples and contact information with United Ways that choose to convene, lead or participate in these recovery groups.

Additionally (in Florida), both the Florida Interfaith Networking in Disaster (FIND) organization and the Governor's Volunteer Florida Foundation are strong supporters of developing recovery organizations, offering both administrative direction and financial support. Each of these can be contacted through their respective websites. For information about similar groups in your state, contact the National VOAD by visiting www.nvoad.org.

Case Management

At the ground level, case management drives the search for resources on behalf of families in recovering communities. In general, Florida United Ways do not conduct case management, but rather support case management activities through the LTROs or associated community organizations. This is a wise choice, as there are other disaster groups that conduct excellent case management programs during recovery. Additionally, local partner agencies may choose to integrate disaster cases with their normal caseload, and will look to United Way to help support this added burden.

For United Ways that would like to be involved with the cases, a better option is to participate in the community's unmet needs committee, where the most difficult cases are brought to the attention of area providers in a group. Here, effective allocation of resources takes place.

Funding through United Way Programs

Currently, the United Way of America funnels disaster donations through its Hurricane Response and Recovery Fund (HRRF), which to date has offered two phases of grant solicitations for recovery work both in Florida and in the Gulf states. As corporate partners offer resources, the information is shared throughout the United Way system. Additionally, United Way of America partners with foundations and companies like Eli Lilly, American Airlines, Home Depot, and MTV to present specific resources such as support for recovery personnel, relocation opportunities, rebuild supplies, and recovery volunteers.

In 2004 the United Way of America partnered with the National Football League in Florida, creating the NFL Draft Program that matched volunteers with specific recovery projects in the Miami Dolphins, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Jacksonville Jaguars territories. The funding from this program continues to serve communities that were hard hit by those storms. For more information about this program as a possible model for your state, visit the Florida NFL Draft website through United Way online.

There are many disaster resources-- from funds to floorboards and shingles-- available for communities in need. Your statewide recovery coordinator can assist your United Way to find and apply for these resources as needed.

Trends & Challenges

Florida Business in Recovery

In Florida a new Emergency Support Function has been added for the 2006 hurricane season: ESF18 is the Long Term Recovery and Economic Development function in disaster. Previously, emergency management's role faded as communities moved into the recovery phase. After the powerful recent storms brought final closure to many Florida businesses, the value of the corporate role in recovery was highlighted in a new way. When employees lost housing, childcare or other support services, they could not return to work quickly. Business that were badly damaged and/or had no continuity plans could not reopen their doors, leaving employees without work and the now-more-than-ever important paycheck. The State of Florida has partnered with workforce agencies, Florida chambers of commerce and other entities to study and develop disaster support for businesses, and to encourage businesses to think about creative ways they can become more actively involved in their community's recovery in the future.

Because of United Ways' close relationships with the corporate world, there will be many opportunities for us to partner with these friends in a mutual disaster response and recovery effort. Our challenge is to examine potential partnerships with our eyes open, and look for scenarios that can benefit our communities well over the long haul.

Mitigation

In the past, Florida mitigation resources have been used primarily to strengthen municipal infrastructure, study flood plain maps for optimum regional planning and zoning, and other community-wide applications. And certainly Florida has been commended for creating the Unified Building Code that addresses new construction techniques for building stronger homes.

But after the storms of 2004 and 2005, Florida experienced such tremendous housing shortages-- due both to storm destruction and to rising real estate costs-- that our need to strengthen *existing* homes became apparent. In the 2006 legislative session, Florida created several multi-million dollar residential mitigation programs so residents can apply for resources to inspect their individual homes and even to fortify homes, especially those of low-income residents in high-wind risk zones.

The Volunteer Florida Foundation has been tasked with finding private non-profits that can assist with mitigation activities and administer these programs at a local level. Long-term recovery organizations that are well run and/or United Ways may find that this type of work fits well with their mission statement of strengthening local families. Mitigation activities will be the work of these entities as we move forward through the next decade of heightened storm activity and beyond. The challenge lies in being careful to take on programs that can be managed within the framework of our mission and our capacity.

Partnership Development

For United Ways that wish to remain involved with disaster response or recovery efforts over the coming decade, there is work to be done regarding our disaster partnerships. As has already been mentioned, we need to examine how to work well with the agencies and organizations that bring disaster expertise to our communities. Naturally these organizations have their own mission statements, resources they typically depend upon to conduct their work, and a sense of experience that we may not share. It behooves us to listen to them, learn about their processes, and seek to mutually benefit each other as we work to benefit our communities.

In May of 2005 the United Way of America became a member of the National VOAD. Other national organizations did not understand United Ways' mission, and were fearful that our obvious mission of fundraising might cut into their own disaster fundraising efforts. Although United Way's primary function is indeed gathering resources to serve our communities, that is not the only way we conduct our work of strengthening families and communities. We need to educate potential disaster partners about the depth of our mission, and seek to understand their perspective as well. It will be through an atmosphere of open and frank conversation that we will overcome obstacles to important disaster partnerships.

Conclusions & Recommendations

On October 28, 2004, after four hurricanes brought deep changes to many Florida communities, the executive directors of the Florida United Ways met to conduct an after-action assessment of their disaster activities. Following are some of the most revealing statements:⁴

Statements of Strength

"There is a strong connectedness between the United Ways in Florida.... These interconnected layers provide a system of support and resources for individual United Ways that increase their capacity to manage the surge in demand after disaster strikes."

"The capacity of the local United Way to expand service [was directly related to] the emergency preparedness levels of the United Way... Collectively, these factors served to provide some United Ways with incredible flexibility..."

"The United Way has incredible resources."

"The United Way is in a unique position to broker information and resource exchanges to meet the pressing needs of the community. The United Way is a trusted entity, with deep roots throughout the community."

"The key message, 'We're here to help, we're not here to take over,' was critical to fostering success."

"The more integrated a United Way was [with the county's emergency management... and its VOAD structure], the greater its capacity to perform."

"The community looks to the United Way... to know where to turn... and to provide the overall safety net for unmet human needs."

Statements of Potential Weakness

"There was recognition that the vast array of potential roles [in disaster]... could become a drain and a distraction for the United Way, negatively impacting its ongoing work in the community."

"The prominent struggle revolves around the lack of clarity [about] the role of the United Way in crisis response. This extensive role confusion... has the potential for significant problems as recovery efforts continue, or in future incidents."

"United Way struggles with the very real, powerful question of 'where do we belong?' in the realm of crisis response." and "The United Way doesn't want to become 'Disasters R Us.'"

⁴ "Hurricane De-brief Meeting Report," Stephen McMahon, 10/28/04

"In many instances throughout the meeting, United Way representatives shared experiences of being 'drafted' to provide a particular service, or that it was 'assumed' that 'x' was a United Way responsibility."

"It is imperative that United Way make the decision to shape its role, rather than having [it] assigned to them by external entities."

Two years later

Florida United Ways took somewhat of an organizational beating during the storms of 2004, as evidenced by the comments above. Since then, however, they have learned the value of making their own decisions *in advance* as to which roles they desire to play and why. After enduring a second year of battering by four more hurricanes, Florida United Ways continue to clarify their local roles, and refine them by:

- An examination of which services were effective, or not
- A study of the resources that were needed, and where resources fell short or were "borrowed" from other programs
- A refinement of their MOUs and other agreements with local government and partner agencies
- A look at where relationships were or were not productive
- More clarification of their involvement with long-term recovery coalitions and the need (or not) to continue leadership in these groups
- Decisions to draw back quietly after other community organizations have picked up needed services or programs
- The need to focus on their community impact goals and traditional activities

Still, there are a few more places where we can make better organizational choices.

Recommendations regarding preparedness

Community disaster preparedness is a function of everyone living in the community. Overall, local emergency management, the American Red Cross and area media take on the primary responsibility for educating a community about family and corporate preparedness. Television weathermen schedule community presentations about hurricanes, while the Red Cross offers excellent training and exercise events for volunteers and businesses. Chambers of commerce sponsor workshops for businesses to learn more about preparedness.

United Way does not have to reinvent any wheels in this arena. United Ways can easily support local preparedness education by requesting partner agencies to integrate materials and announcements into their community programs at every level. Perhaps United Way can financially support this effort by augmenting hurricane guide distribution numbers, or by assuring that non-English speaking people in their community have enough guides printed in their language (as was the case in Manatee County.)

Additionally, United Ways hold a certain set of requirements when funding their partner agencies. The development of a COOP for each funded agency is an easy way to assure the

community that United Way takes preparedness seriously. Requiring funded agencies to have a COOP would help to safeguard agency assets and assure that they're able to be responsive in the aftermath of an event, benefiting the whole community. United Way might even consider hosting workshops for these agencies wherein they are led through the COOP development process, or are given templates and samples to work from.

Regarding Response

The response phase holds the greatest challenge for United Ways with regard to their role. Immediately after a disaster, the destruction, loss, and dramatic persistent media coverage bring a sense of despair and hopelessness into the community. Individuals and groups often respond by jumping in and doing the first thing they think of. Of course, immediate needs of shelter, medical attention, food and water must be met, and all elements of the community work long, hot hours together to meet them.

As mentioned in the October 28th report, there are so many options-- so many services and resources needed. In the discussion above, typical United Way response activities were listed. The key to a sane United Way response lies in *making advance decisions*.

Local United Ways must choose their response roles ahead of time, including a clear guideline concerning the resources they will offer, the time and energy they will designate to these activities, and their response goals (anticipated and hopefully measurable outcomes.)

Not only do we need to choose our role in advance, but we need to *educate the community* about what we'll be doing so they won't be expecting something else. It's our job to tell the world who and what we are, rather than let them define us. If we tell them that our 211 will be handling emergency calls, we'll do it well. If we tell them we'll be handing out water and ice throughout the community, and they see us in our United Way T-shirts and caps, they won't be wondering why we're not feeding people in the shelters or cutting up debris with chain saw crews.

We need to remember that we can't and shouldn't try to do it all. There are many other wonderful organizations-- especially the Red Cross, Salvation Army and local congregations-- that move mountains during the relief phase of disaster. We need to carefully pick the role(s) that fits within our mission, and do this well.

One last reminder: a key role the local United Way always plays during disaster is to channel resources (cash and products) into the community either directly or through our partner agencies. This role must be considered first and foremost, before we pile on the burden of alternative services.

Regarding Recovery

United Way is a *convener*, not necessarily a director in long-term recovery groups (committees, coalitions, or organizations.) Reference the comment taken from the October 28th report:

"The key message, 'We're here to help, we're not here to take over,' was critical to fostering success."

In communities where the United Way offered to convene meetings, offered office space and even office equipment, and offered support services such as that of fiscal agent or funding of key recovery positions, the community was led to successfully develop their congregate approach to recovery, and the various elements-- assessment, case management, benefits assistance, recovery services and rebuild projects-- found their appropriate niche.

Occasionally a United Way attempted to exert a bit too much control, leaving other organizations to feel that they didn't have an equal "say" in how the recovery process was put together. In one community, the United Way held most of the "value cards"-- financial support for recovery positions, fiscal control over recovery processes, and final approval over cases for which funds were utilized.

In that community, partner agencies were cautious about speaking honestly about concerns, other organizations spoke up but felt disregarded, so when coordinator and volunteers didn't deliver reports as expected, the United Way decided to withdraw their support. Because the LTR committee could not find other funding to continue the position, the committee essentially folded and unfinished repair projects and grants were handed to the local volunteer center to complete.

In hindsight, the United Way director said that they should have become involved differently, rather than as fiscal agent and funder of the coordinator. From an outsider's perspective, local partnerships and alliances were not strong enough to propel this committee successfully past the challenges they faced as a growing recovery entity.

The most important role United Way can play in recovery is to build strong relationships *in advance* with those community partners who will be affected and involved. Setting aside time annually with these partners to go over MOUs and other written agreements concerning each organization's role in recovery helps to avoid misunderstanding and territorial issues once a disaster has arrived in the community.

Secondly, United Way must decide ahead of time what recovery role it is willing to fill, and be clear about this with its partner agencies and community friends. When the disaster has passed and community assessments are being conducted, United Way can follow through with its stated goals, as well as be a confident supporter of other organizations as they work together to help its community recover.

Finally, within the organization we must stay connected from top to bottom concerning our recovery efforts. Executives can motivate donors, and marketing staff can more easily demonstrate our community value and goals if they are aware of the role their staff and volunteers are fulfilling at the "ground level." One way to keep everyone informed might be to hold daily or weekly in-house briefings wherein disaster-tasked staff can update the rest of the organization about current conditions.

The Hurricanes of 2004 and 2005

Of the nine hurricanes listed on the National Hurricane Center website for 2004, four made landfall in or close to Florida. All four storms brought serious destruction to the communities they visited. These were:

- Charley, landfall in southwest Florida, August 13, Category 4
- Frances, landfall in southeast Florida, September 5, Category 2
- Ivan, landfall just west of Pensacola, Florida, September 16, Category 3
- Jeanne, landfall on the east coast of Florida, September 26, Category 3

Of the 15 Atlantic hurricanes listed for 2005 on the National Hurricane Center, again four adversely impacted Florida communities. In 2005, however, only two of the storms brought a high level of destruction. The 2005 Florida hurricanes were:

- Dennis, landing in Santa Rosa (western panhandle), July 10), Category 3
- Katrina, landfall north of Miami, August 25, Category 1
- Rita, landfall Key West, September 20, Category 2
- Wilma, landfall in southwest Florida, Naples, October 24, Category 3

In addition to the direct impacts these storms had on Florida communities, the 70,000+ evacuees from Katrina's Mississippi/Louisiana landfall on August 29, 2005 was an equally pressing "disaster" for the Florida communities to which they fled.

For detailed information about these storms and the evacuee influx, including which Florida United Ways were affected, please see Appendix E: "The Storms."

Are We Prepared?

A survey of the availability of written, updated internal disaster plans and/or business continuity plans found that of the 35 Florida United Ways (including the United Way of Florida):

- 18 have internal disaster preparedness plans (51%)
- 11 have written, completed business continuity plans or COOPs (31%)
- 4 think they have plans, but upon review of these, the submission is actually a template that has not been completed with information pertinent to that United Way

Simply stated, the lack of a written document indicates the lack of a plan. When an executive director returns to offices that have been flooded or blown apart, his or her current state of mind is probably not going to be at its optimum creativity. It's too late for valuable input from other staff or board members. It's too late to create back-up data or hope that the checkbook hasn't been stolen or destroyed. It's too late to look for recovery resources because that's what the rest of the community will be out there looking for, and they'll be hard to find.

Disaster plans are formulated to protect lives and property and to enable a business to pickup critical tasks quickly post-disaster. At the very least, the no-plan-needed type of thinking leaves out consideration for board members, other volunteers and partner agencies that may depend upon United Way's executive leadership after the storm passes. A good disaster plan tells the rest of the world that you care about what may happen to your facilities, your employees and volunteers, and your programs and services.

An effective plan is not measured by its length. It is true that disaster plans for a large organization with dozens of employees and expensive campuses may be more bulky than the plan for a small, three-person staff that rents two rooms somewhere. But in every case, a written plan is an indication that someone has at least given thought to what may need to be done in an emergency.

Those Who Can Answer 'Yes'

United Ways that are prepared have the following documents, completed with the unique information pertinent to only their organization. These documents are updated annually, and a prepared organization takes time annually to "exercise" the plan through the use of drills or disaster scenarios. Employees who have experienced the contents of the plan are far more likely to follow these instructions under duress than those who can barely remember where to find the plan, much less how to follow it.

1. A good *internal disaster preparedness plan* addresses both sudden and threatening disasters, instructing employees with regard to the protection of life and property. This plan includes a method of communicating with all pertinent parties (absent staff, board members, key volunteers, corporate partners and funded agencies) with regard to the status of the organization and its activities at various times pre- and post disaster. The plan should also include a secondary "rally point" for use when evacuation of the facilities is required

(especially sudden evacuation), and a list of local emergency numbers. Good plans also include a list of items employees should take with them in case of evacuation, such as the organization's checkbook, data files, or key box. Special emergency equipment is often noted on such a list. Finally, a good plan clearly indicates who is responsible for which tasks, in order to avoid the "I thought you were looking after that..." scenario.

2. A business continuity plan, sometimes called a continuity of operations plan or 'COOP,' is vital to post-disaster activities of an organization. This plan spells out which tasks the organization feels must be carried out immediately, versus those that can be suspended for a time. It explains exactly who will take responsibility for which tasks, and who will play a critical role post-disaster. These instructions help employees to know whether their services will be needed immediately, or whether they may take necessary time to deal with personal losses post-disaster.

A COOP explains the interaction of the organization with community partners, including any MOUs or other external responsibilities. If the United Way operates a 211, I&R service or volunteer center, the COOP will instruct employees regarding these services also. A good COOP will give enough information that the loss of any one person will not hinder the whole organization as it participates in response or recovery efforts.

Finally, a COOP also needs to be updated annually for relevancy and changes in personnel or programs, and exercised from time to time so that involved leaders are familiar with it when disaster strikes.

Where to find tools for Preparedness

There are dozens of sample plans, templates for the development of good disaster plans, and many sister members who will gladly share their great plans. The United Way of America offers many tools for this work, including an excellent checklist of questions that help a United Way to determine whether they are prepared to serve their community post-disaster, called "Are You Ready to Serve Your Community in a Crisis?" All of these tools can be found at United Way's online website. The Michigan Association of United Ways also recently published a great document entitled "Crisis Preparedness and Response," which can be downloaded from their website.

Similarly, the American Red Cross and area chambers of commerce offer wonderful training sessions to help corporate and non-profit organizations develop good disaster plans.

Appendices

These documents offer more information about this discussion:

A. The Phases of Disaster

B. Florida Long-term Recovery Coordinators staffed in or supported by local United Ways, August 2006

C. State of Florida Emergency Support Functions List

D. "Hurricane De-brief Meeting Report," Stephen McMahon, October 28, 2004

E. The Storms of 2004 and 2005, excerpted from the National Hurricane Center website

F. Interim statistics on Florida damages, compiled October 20, 2005

G. Final Grant Report on Activities, Statewide Recovery Coordinator

H. Examples of United Way Response & Recovery Work in Florida