

Action in Crisis and Uncertainty

Houston's Response to Hurricane Katrina

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Within days of Katrina's landfall, Houston's population swelled with a quarter-million displaced New Orleanians. Among those evacuees was half of the New Orleans Jewish community, about 5,000 people. The Jewish Federation of Greater Houston mobilized a massive relief effort, mobilizing hundreds of volunteers, raising \$650,000 from within the Houston Jewish community, and distributing those funds along with an additional \$1.5 million granted from United Jewish Communities to help both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. In this article, based on a recent interview and his e-mails in the weeks following Katrina, Wunsch describes those intense, uncertain, but exciting times.

Being close to the Gulf Coast, Houston gets its share of hurricanes, and part of our summer routine is watching the weather forecast. So even before Howard Feinberg, lead staff person for the UJC Emergency Committee, called me several days before Katrina, we were on alert. We were also not surprised when Adam Bronstone, then the Planning Director of the New Orleans Federation, called and asked if a couple of the New Orleans Federation staff could use some of our office space and phones. Of course, I said yes.

Within a few days, the scope of the disaster became clear. What we thought would be a temporary situation lasted almost a year, as the entire city of New Orleans had to be evacuated. Our board room, filled with computers and phones, became the official headquarters for the New Orleans Jewish Federation, staffed by New Orleans Federation professionals.

There was no time for the "traditional committee process," as decisions had to be made quickly and authoritatively. Many of our key lay leaders were out of town, es-

caping the Houston heat, and we had to respond immediately. But I knew that they would be supportive and that whatever decisions had to be made or expenses we had to incur, they would endorse our efforts.

Although there was great uncertainty, within two to three days after Katrina made landfall, we had a general sense of what the needs of the New Orleanians would be and what the Houston Jewish community would be asked to do. I called a few key Jewish communal professionals and prevailed on them to assume responsibilities for coordinating various aspects of the relief effort. Without hesitation, all said yes—including the executive directors of two very large synagogues, just three weeks before the High Holidays! Within just a few days, we had an outstanding group of Jewish professionals and volunteers who were mobilized to lead the relief effort.

The first 60 days following Katrina were very intense. We did not know what would be happening from one day to the next, and each day, another crisis emerged or another area of need surfaced. I had to make deci-

sions from important ones like how to arrange for families to be seen by doctors to more mundane ones like how to respond to the literally thousands of e-mails and phone calls we were receiving every day.

As in any crisis, communication with the Houston Jewish community was an essential component of our relief efforts. During the first weeks after Katrina, I sent out broadcast e-mails almost every day to members of the Houston Jewish community, sharing some of the stories of need and of heroism and asking them to contribute their money and to volunteer their time. Here are a few of those stories:

- Early in the crisis, I was advised that the former administrative assistant to the New Orleans Section of the National Council of Jewish Women was in the Astrodome with her family, along with 25,000 refugees from New Orleans who had been rescued from the Superdome and transported by bus to Houston. I dispatched two volunteers from the Houston Jewish community who brought her to the JCC where the family showered and received clean clothes. They were treated to a hot meal by another member of the Houston Jewish community. The family spent their first few nights in temporary housing, rent-free thanks to another generous member of the Houston Jewish community.
- The San Diego Jewish Academy donated a planeload of school supplies, bottled water, diapers, food, toiletries, gift cards, and over-the-counter medications; several of its students, parents, and faculty traveled to Houston to help in the distribution of these goods. It was truly a memorable experience when the UPS-donated 747 cargo plane landed at Bush Intercontinental Airport, followed closely by a donated private plane carrying the delegation from the San Diego Jewish Academy. As we met them on the tarmac, we were joined by students from one of Houston's Jewish day schools and

drivers from UPS who would transport the donations by truck to several shelters and pantries throughout the Houston area.

- A maintenance worker at the New Orleans JCC was rescued from New Orleans by an "Angel Flight" and flown to Houston where he was picked up by a member of the Houston Federation staff and then put on a flight to New Mexico to be reunited with his family.

We did not have the time to think strategically; in fact, we had no time to think at all. We just had to act. Fortunately, I was (and still am) blessed with a great staff that seized the initiative to make things happen: I was and am still blessed with wonderful volunteers, many of whom worked 'round the clock.

The Houston Federation became the central command center of a massive relief effort both to the Jewish and non-Jewish community. The Mayor of Houston called on the faith community to take responsibility for feeding the thousands of people evacuated to the Astrodome. Thanks to our wonderful partnership with United Jewish Communities (UJC), we were able to represent the Jewish community in this effort.

We distributed \$1.5 million in funds granted from UJC to 16 community organizations, which we carefully vetted. These groups in turn provided food pantries, soup kitchens, clothing centers, counseling, housing, and job centers for Katrina victims.

In addition, we raised \$650,000 from within the Houston Jewish community in a matter of weeks. With both the UJC funds and the money we raised, the Houston Jewish community contributed the third highest amount of any organization in the city of Houston to Hurricane Katrina relief.

While the UJC funds benefited the non-Jewish community, funds raised locally were used to enable local Jewish communal agencies to help the 5,000 Jews of New Orleans, now living in Houston.

- Eighty-five children were immediately enrolled, tuition-free, in Houston's five Jewish day schools.
- Jewish Family Service helped many families who lost their homes to obtain housing, furniture, and clothing. JFS also coordinated a variety of health care services.
- The JCC collected and distributed clothing and offered free memberships to New Orleans families.
- Seven Acres Jewish Geriatric Center in Houston was involved in the rescue and placement of many Jewish and non-Jewish elderly living in nursing home facilities in New Orleans.
- Houston synagogues opened their doors to evacuees for Shabbat worship and subsequently for the High Holidays.

Those from New Orleans who normally were the ones supporting and investing in community services were now on the receiving end of those services. We had to create opportunities to welcome and engage those new to the process of seeking help. Those opportunities included holding open forums with experts in insurance and creating a pool of insurance agents who would both receive calls and reach out to New Orleanians who needed assistance. We held job fairs to publicize temporary employment opportunities. "Family to family" programs were established to match Houston families with New Orleans families and to welcome the evacuees for Shabbat, holidays, and other activities.

In addition, our professional colleagues in New Orleans were faced with the daunting task of leading a community that had relocated to 70 cities (more than half came to Houston) while also coping with their own personal and family losses. We offered them personal and emotional support.

Although we had to put our own Annual Campaign on hold for a few months, it did not suffer. The role that the Houston Federation played in the relief effort was a source of great pride to our lay leaders, who saw their investment in the infrastructure of

the Houston Jewish community bear fruit literally overnight as the Federation mobilized for the benefit of others.

After about two months, we actually had the time to brief our lay leadership on the relief process and the expenses we were incurring. They were fully supportive and expressed no hesitation about our going forward, even though no one knew how long or how expensive that process would be.

Within four to five months, we were back to a period of relative normalcy, and we could all stop to analyze what we were doing and reflect on some of the lessons learned.

- *Deal with crisis as it happens:* Community leaders are in a leadership position because they know how to react instinctively and how to take charge. They also should have earned enough respect from their staff and lay leaders that they will be given the latitude and freedom to make things happen in times of crisis. There is a real danger in "paralysis by analysis"; sometimes you have to act first and ask questions later.
- *Go outside the normal parameters of one's professional role:* I am committed to empowering volunteers as leaders in our communities and balancing the lay leadership/professional partnership. But sometimes that partnership must be suspended. Sometimes we as professionals must not only rise to the occasion but we must do so outside the normal parameters that most of us find appropriate and comfortable. Did I consciously make a decision to suspend the partnership? The easy answer is no. I did, however, realize that immediate action was required, and immediate action requires minimizing process and bureaucracy while maximizing action and taking many risks.
- *Leave your egos at the door:* Put simply, in an emergency effort, egos just get in the way of being productive. One of my roles as leader of this effort was to manage the ego needs of both individuals and

organizations for the benefit of the community and the relief effort.

- *Having deep roots in a community makes a difference:* The traditional career-development model of rising in the Federation ranks is to move from community to community. I took a different path, having lived in Houston for the past 30 years and working at the Federation here for the past 20. Except for a brief period at the beginning of my career, I have only worked in the Houston Jewish community.

Knowing the community and its key players so well made it much easier for

me to call on them in crisis. I could pick up the phone and call any volunteer or communal professional and expect instant cooperation, because of the depth of our relationships and my stability in the community. This was invaluable.

The stories of the days and weeks following landfall of Hurricane Katrina are now part of the history and culture of Houston. We in Houston reacted and responded to people in need, and when the next crisis situation comes along, we will do the same thing. If we did not respond in this way, we should not be in this business.