



AFTER THE FIRES – LEARNINGS FROM PRG CLIENT CONVERSATIONS

November 9, 2017

Background:

The Partnership Resources Group contacted its current and former client agencies in Sonoma County immediately after the fires to offer consultation and a sounding-board on issues that impact or may impact their fundraising and overall fiscal well-being. Among the many sobering issues and concerns we heard, the primary themes that emerged common to most of these eleven agencies are presented in this summary.

1. Differentiating Nonprofit Agencies as Responders

In the aftermath of the fires, two defining agency “categories” emerged. Those non-profit agencies that have a mission and work that is directly connected to the basic disaster recovery efforts and readily perceived as such, e.g. the Redwood Empire Food Bank and Catholic Charities were front and center during the firestorm. These agencies for the most part possess the connections, donor base and visibility to be effective in what will become a very crowded, competitive and fatigued donor pool.

The other set of nonprofits – agencies primarily known for services that are not immediately nor visibly tied to the principal tasks of recovery (in the minds of the donors and the general public) – have found it more difficult to respond to donor questions and potential fatigue. Of these organizations some are less financially secure, lack high profile visibility, have a slender base of individual donors, and may not have developed the stewardship capability necessary to connect with and retain those donors.

Clearly the impact of the fires is equally profound on both kinds of agencies – their staff and board members lost homes, their clients are traumatized, and their operations were disrupted like those of many local businesses.

Implications:

The work to be done during the recovery phase will involve rebuilding, healing and re-imagining. The agencies not directly tied to disaster relief or the primary efforts of rebuilding need help to build a new case for support that ties their services to the healing challenges, e.g. serving the needs of traumatized kids, displaced families, the disabled, seniors and neighborhood rebuilding. They can and should play an important role as ‘second responders,’ dealing with the psychological aspects of recovery and the healing dimension of the recovery effort. There is and will be a yearning for normalcy and these agencies can play a significant role in the restoration of the torn community fabric.

2. Leveling the Recovery Playing Field

The first wave of philanthropy, like that generated thru Redwood Credit Union’s Fire Relief Fund has been used for “triage” support to get money in the hands of individual fire victims as quickly and efficiently as possible. Now that many of those immediate/emergency needs have been met, a second phase of philanthropy will be focused on recovery. There is concern about whether there will be **equity and balance** in distribution of charitable funds over the long recovery period ahead.

This concern was consistently voiced by every agency with whom we spoke. A number of important questions were raised. Will distribution of funds be targeted to benefit the most vulnerable and those with the least resources? Will the process of distribution be transparent? What are the ground rules, who is making these decisions on behalf of the community and who is advising them on these decisions? Will agencies be forced to compete for an inevitably shrinking pool of funds with homeowners, neighborhoods and businesses? How can this not become divisive, and, unify rather than divide the community?

Implications: Nonprofits would be well-served to come together as a sector and unify their concerns and voices. There are partnership possibilities with many in the faith-based organizations, local school PTAs and other affected groups. The non-profit community in Sonoma County has great political, economic and creative strength, but only as a collective. *(More in the section below on collaboration)*

3. Redefining “Vulnerable”

As reported in the *Press Democrat* (11/2), the numbers in Santa Rosa’s homeless encampments have already begun to swell with the emergence of the ‘new homeless.’ This population is comprised of renters who have lost their jobs and can no longer find affordable housing (some of whom were living on a shoestring before the fire), low income, disabled, and chronically-disadvantaged people who lost their housing, the uninsured, people suffering from mental health issues caused by the fires and other displaced folks with no resources. This group will continue to grow, placing enormous strain on nonprofit agencies and the County’s services.

Senior Adults were disproportionately affected by the disaster; they also made up the bulk of fatalities. Many had moved here from outside the county, selecting Sonoma County as a desirable retirement location. Now an untold number of these retirees have been displaced, left with no family support in the area. Many are living on fixed-incomes, emotionally fragile, confused by disruption in their lives and often have extenuating health issues.

Hunger, homelessness and isolation are nothing new to Sonoma County. The disaster is swelling these ranks and redefining who is now vulnerable.

Implications:

An emerging coalition of homeless serving agencies and a similar collective of Senior Adult-serving providers including the COA should be at the forefront of responding to the growing number of homeless, and advocating for seniors. The creation of new, affordable, permanent housing in this rebuilding period is an opportunity now on everybody's minds. The disaster suggests networks of service-providers look to coordinate their resources – many are already doing so – to provide rapid, life-saving disaster response through responsible, efficient community planning in new and uncharted waters. This is complex – the community expects rapid response to emerging needs of the 'new' homeless while also ensuring that the voice of the disenfranchised is heard during the recovery phase.

4. Displacement

There is significant concern that temporary displacement will become permanent. Some residents have already left Sonoma County because they can't afford to rebuild their lives here or they can't find rental housing that meets their needs at any price. Others are leaving because the specter of rebuilding homes or restarting lives is simply too emotionally difficult to bear. Everyone seems to have a story of someone who fits this situation. There is anecdotal evidence, for example, that out-migration has already begun among physicians.

Implications:

It is impossible just yet to quantify the scope of medium-term or permanent displacement. A 'brain drain' and loss of workforce, especially in the lower-paid industries that unfortunately includes many non-profits, will reverberate throughout the region. For nonprofits, displacement has profound implications. Much of their workforce is comprised of younger, low-wage, mission-driven workers. Staff shortages will be particularly difficult at a time when service demands will increase. A decrease in client census due to displacement will also result in lost earned income for some providers.

5. Communal Empathy

As the firestorm did not discriminate between the wealthy and poor, some of those who were evacuated from million-dollar homes and were forced to spend time in a shelter with just the clothes they were wearing, experiencing for the first time the reality of homelessness and the "shame" of dependency. Press accounts carried story after story about people of means living in shelters with the "underprivileged." Memories of these experiences may foster a new sense of empathy and compassion among some of these individuals as they re-build their lives and retain a residual appreciation for what it really means to be homeless. Nearly everyone in the county has a personal connection to someone directly affected by the fire.

Implications:

As the shock from this disaster recedes and the more fortunate begin to rebuild their lives, the experience of loss is permanent for many. Being homeless, nearly homeless or hungry is a state of being not confined to the aftermath of a fire. However, the visceral experience of these circumstances among those who were otherwise comfortable presents an opportunity for agencies to capture their stories and preserve them as part of community awareness and more importantly as an opportunity for donor stewardship.

6. Wave of Giving

The outpouring of donations to the RCU, CFSC, Tipping Point, dozens of smaller funds, and to the front-line agencies directly, has been truly phenomenal. Much of this initial giving is directly assisting fire victims, first responders and displaced residents and students. But for the most part, little of these funds have reached the agencies with whom we spoke. At the same time, donors outside of the county have made substantial and often, first time gifts to both Funds and agencies. Some estimates are that more than \$100 million in charitable gifts have been received in the wake of the disaster.

Implications:

The principal concern expressed by agency leaders is how these sources of ‘new giving’ can be sustained after the inevitable donor fatigue sets in, the large disaster-response funds have been depleted and the fires’ aftermath no longer occupies the headlines. All projections for at least the next few years point to increased need and much greater demands on service providers, some of whom were already facing decreased funding from the Federal and state levels, and are likely to be scrambling for workers.

Agencies that already possess fund development capacity have the ability and systems to steward donors, current and new, and apply standard best-practices that can incentivize ongoing, multi-year gifts. Smaller agencies with little or no fund development infrastructure will likely struggle with keeping donors informed and engaged. These organizations would benefit from fund development capacity-building assistance along with funding for recovery efforts. A collective strategy aimed at retaining these large, new investors in Sonoma County’s non-profits, would be a smart, strategic effort with benefits for all.

There is likewise a sense of the “North Bay as One.” Marin County residents and agencies were particularly responsive to and impacted by the disaster. One wonders if a new day is at hand in the coming together of these geographical partners.

7. Fragmentation vs. Collaboration

We heard countless stories of agencies and their staffs coming to the aid of one another during the fire and since. Still, many organizations have understandably been internally-focused in the weeks since the fires, relocating facilities, moving staff to respond to emerging crises, trying to support suddenly homeless employees and reaching out to displaced clients. As the recovery period unfolds and, undoubtedly with it, greater scrutiny about how funds are being used, it is reasonable to anticipate that donors (and the greater public) will be sensitive to perceived agency silos and any apparent conflicts over “turf” and funding. Against this backdrop, insightful donors will be more inclined to support those agencies which are tangibly engaged in collaboration to leverage their collective resources, especially at a time when “Sonoma Strong” is a prominent rallying cry.

We heard many ideas of collaboration: A multi-agency benefit gala in lieu of each agency’s individual, annual event; training a cross-agency workforce to assemble modular homes; multi-agency teams supporting those in homeless encampments; artists, social workers and therapists bringing arts program into schools.

Implications:

It would be wise to document how agencies came together toward the greater good during and immediately after the fire, as proof positive that there is a willing, capable and compassionate network of service providers that above all else, care about community well-being. Ideas about how to make cross-agency efforts a more permanent part of the area’s service fabric should be encouraged and publicized. We believe that this would be welcome news to donors and clients who would benefit from more streamlined service delivery. Easier said than done but there is more fertile ground for these conversations than ever before.