



# Ready or Not

## Ensuring Bay Area Nonprofits Can Serve During Disaster

*Executive Summary*

*In partnership with:*

Northern California Grantmakers

PG&E

Levi Strauss

Walter and Elise Haas Foundation

Fritz Institute

San Francisco Foundation



United Way of the Bay Area

# Executive Summary

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina took nearly 2,000 lives and displaced staggering numbers of people on its way to becoming the costliest natural disaster in US history: over \$80 billion and counting. Katrina came on the heels of 9/11 and the Asian tsunami that killed over 230,000 people; it was followed by the Pakistani earthquake that displaced 3.2 million people, as well as by the threat of a deadly pandemic flu. Together these events make clear that a disaster or combination of disasters that pack the impact of a Katrina can occur again. The Bay Area – with its seismic instability, coastal exposure, and dense, urban population – is one of the most likely locations. Ready or not, Bay Area nonprofits will be called upon to serve the community during a catastrophic disaster.

At the request and with the support of the Northern California Grantmakers, PG&E, Levi Strauss, Walter and Elise Haas Foundation, the Fritz Institute, and the San Francisco Foundation –United Way of the Bay Area worked with many Bay Area organizations to research whether the necessary collaborations are in place to ensure the nonprofit sector can respond as needed during disaster. This report reveals the results of that research.

## Three Lessons, Three Pressing Concerns

As tragic as Katrina and subsequent disasters were, they provide essential lessons for those trying to prepare for future disasters. Three of those lessons have particular relevance for the Bay Area nonprofit community:

1. It is common to underestimate the complexity involved in responding to a catastrophic disaster, and therefore fail to prepare properly.
2. In the wake of a catastrophic disaster, the nonprofit community plays a critical response role, especially in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations.
3. Collaboration and information sharing among nonprofits and the public sector is essential for an effective response – and the systems and protocols necessary to effectively share information must be in place before a disaster. Trying to set up those systems and share information once disaster has struck costs lives.

On the positive side, several Bay Area counties already contain the seeds of the nonprofit infrastructure needed for collaborative disaster planning. Those seeds are germinating in conjunction with the public sector's response and recovery work, which has been particularly strong in initiatives such as San Francisco's Coordinated Assistance Network (SF CAN).

Nevertheless, the research also exposed three holes that could cripple the ability of nonprofits to respond effectively in a crisis:

1. **Plans not enough:** Too many agencies believe that once they have a written plan, they're done – a costly mistake in other disasters. Few Bay Area nonprofits have done enough to institutionalize learning and create a sustainable framework for preparedness.
2. **We have not seen the worst:** Many take comfort in their efficient responses to events like the East Bay fire and Loma Prieta earthquake. They assume that ramping up personnel or emergency supplies will be enough to perform well during a larger-scale disaster like the major earthquake that experts predict will occur here. Disaster response literature does not support this assumption.
3. **Nonprofit response lacks common standards, tools:** There are few established and widely understood standards and protocols to facilitate information sharing between Bay Area nonprofits and the public and private sectors in the event of a disaster. In fact, most agencies don't fully understand what such standards and protocols should entail. They make the common mistake of assuming information sharing means technology, rather than seeing effective information sharing as a set of interdependent and ongoing human and organizational processes. Technology is just one piece.

These are hardly the only concerns that emerged from the research, but these three findings indicate that unless nonprofits can accelerate and refine their collaborative disaster preparedness efforts, the Bay Area is more vulnerable to a catastrophic disaster than it needs to be. The good news is that the research also identified organizations and ingredients in each county that bode well for the nonprofit sector's ability to fill these holes and help government agencies mitigate the human and financial costs of a catastrophic disaster.

## The Research

The research for "Ready or Not" involved rigorously combing existing literature – both pre- and post-Katrina – and conducting in-depth interviews with over 50 leaders in disaster response efforts across the nine Bay Area counties. Interviews were kept anonymous so leaders could speak candidly. The primary focus was the evaluation of existing structures for nonprofits to collectively prepare for and respond to a major disaster.

The research framework drew on best practices developed over decades of relief work – including Katrina – and then focused on the components most relevant to the Bay Area. It assumes a worst-case scenario that displaces far more than the 200,000-300,000 individuals commonly assumed in current planning efforts. The thinking is that in addition to the possibility that an "off the charts" natural disaster might strike, a natural disaster could occur concurrently with another disaster or even a terrorist attack. The report uses the research framework to assess the collaborative readiness of the nonprofit sector, as well as to provide models and recommendations that build on existing efforts.

## The Findings in Brief

1. **Promising starting points:** Bay Area nonprofits are making some progress in preparing for a disaster. Each county contains organizations and ingredients well-positioned to build the relationships, agreements, work plans and communications systems needed for success.
2. **Need for common standards:** A lack of established, accepted, and widely understood standards and protocols to facilitate information sharing between Bay Area nonprofits and the public and private sectors is the single greatest threat to an effective response by the nonprofit sector. Agencies universally recognize the critical importance of coordination and information sharing and are making progress on technical issues like emergency data standards<sup>1</sup>, but too often fail to see beyond the technology.
3. **Training Requires Update:** Trainings and organizational capacity building do not currently incorporate lessons learned and best practices from recent catastrophic disasters.
4. **Standard public-nonprofit linkages needed:** Despite the likelihood of a major catastrophic disaster and the new public sector trend toward regional approaches, there is no standardized regional approach that includes Bay Area nonprofits. Some Bay Area county governments have made a concerted effort to reach out to their nonprofit communities, but in other counties, a lack of resources or failure to acknowledge the importance of reaching out has hampered collaboration.
5. **Inadequate culture of learning:** The necessary culture and infrastructure of learning needed to support long-term and ongoing disaster preparedness work does not yet exist. Consequently, preparedness efforts are not sustainable, especially given the high staff turnover rates, and episodic funding of preparedness initiatives in the nonprofit sector.
6. **Dearth of resources:** Bay Area nonprofits need more resources to prepare.
7. **Public and philanthropic commitment is uneven:** Major funding and policy organizations are only sporadically engaged in prompting the nonprofit community, the philanthropic and public sectors, and the community at-large to prepare for a catastrophic disaster.
8. **Vulnerable populations still vulnerable:** Numerous efforts are underway to serve vulnerable populations in a disaster, but there are no periodic assessments that ensure the efforts will succeed.
9. **Need to systemitize advocacy efforts:** There is no systematic approach to identifying, formally addressing, and presenting to government bodies the public policy issues essential to the success of nonprofit preparedness.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.incident.com/cookbook/index.php/A\\_Roadmap\\_to\\_Emergency\\_Data\\_Standards](http://www.incident.com/cookbook/index.php/A_Roadmap_to_Emergency_Data_Standards)

## Recommendations

There is enormous potential for regional organizations to collaborate on a number of pressing issues. The issues include everything from disseminating the lessons of Katrina to identifying, promoting, and implementing common standards for preparedness response and recovery roles. The study formulated specific suggestions in seven areas:

- 1. Establish formal communication and collaboration systems.** Create a catastrophic disaster preparedness fusion center to design, build, implement, and maintain shared information management standards, and protocols for the coordinated collection, sharing, analyzing, synthesizing and disseminating of information for a broad range of responders. Organizations should also establish cross-sector Catastrophic Disaster Rapid Response Assessment teams to support existing capacity.
- 2. Identify, define, and implement essential collaborative tasks and action plans.** For example, agree on what information products (i.e., a geographic information systems map that clarifies who is doing what where and with whom) will be available and on how nonprofits will access and contribute to them. Create cross-organization working groups responsible for key elements of disaster response such as coordination and logistics, shelter, and health care.
- 3. Build the necessary technical capacity.** For example, groups should ensure there is a single web-based portal for disseminating information to responders, as well as a single portal for nonprofit disaster preparedness in the Bay Area.
- 4. Provide basic and advanced training and tools.** These tools would range from a “disaster in a box” response tool kit for smaller agencies that have not attended trainings to detailed guidelines on operational issues in a catastrophic disaster.
- 5. Initiate sustainable funding systems and strategies.** In addition to securing a grant for a catastrophic disaster preparedness center, develop strategies for emergency funding for smaller and mid-size nonprofits, community-based organizations and faith-based groups. Call for county and foundation grants to increase their support for disaster response planning.
- 6. Explore and cement partnerships outside the nonprofit sector.** Begin immediately to establish links with the military, international non-governmental organizations, and business leaders. To ensure financial accountability in a rapid ramp-up of programs, partner with financial experts for assistance on best practices.
- 7. Develop public policy and advocacy recommendations and programs.** Create a collaborative working group that could begin work immediately on public policy issues that could help the area prepare. The full “Ready or Not” report will identify numerous policy and advocacy efforts that are needed at the county, state, and federal levels.

## **An Immediate Next Step**

The fundamental lesson of Katrina is that the preparedness bar was set too low. In considering the impact of an earthquake of the proportions experts predict for the region, the same can be said for the Bay Area. Despite good intentions and some exemplary work, the collaborative, ongoing processes that experts agree are essential to mitigating the effects of a catastrophic disaster are not yet in place here in a sustainable way.

We hope this report can serve as a catalyst for correcting this problem. As an immediate next step, we suggest that major regional organizations come together to consider the recommendations herein, agree on the most valuable initiatives underway to promote nonprofit capacity, and develop ways to build upon what exists. Such a conference can be a significant first step toward achieving the standards of preparedness that can save lives and soften the impact of catastrophic disasters on Bay Area communities.

**The full “Ready or Not” report, including detailed plans of action for the Bay Area’s nonprofit sector, will be available Spring 2007 on our website, [www.uwba.org](http://www.uwba.org).**

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