



Lessons from Florida 2004, with Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Jeanne

What two NeighborWorks® organizations in Florida learned in 2004 when strong hurricanes battered their communities may help others respond to major disasters in the future.

South Central Florida

Thoughtful Goals, Strong Advocacy, ‘Creative Persistence,’ Flexibility Are Keys

BY STEVEN MAINSTER

After hurricane Andrew, in 1992, NeighborWorks® affiliate **Centro Campesino Farmworker Center** of Florida City was the major nonprofit community development corporation engaged in hurricane rebuilding for low-income families in the Homestead and Florida City areas.

In the 12 months after the hurricane, Centro repaired or replaced 50 homes and spent more than \$1 million in the effort. We also developed a tent city, which housed more

than 500 people, and served a thousand meals a day in partnership with the U.S. Army.

So, when Hurricanes Charley, Frances and Jeanne hit South Central Florida in 2004, we thought we had a plan.

We would drastically increase funding and staff so we could serve the major hurricane repair and replacement needs of families in the most damaged counties in our service area, with emphasis on Desoto and Hardee Counties. In Desoto

and Hardee Counties, it was estimated that 7,000 housing units had been damaged beyond repair and thousands of others had major damage. Many homes belonged to low-income families, with inadequate or no insurance. Many families were new immigrants who didn't speak English, and were not eligible for government assistance.

We would operate our hurricane rebuilding plan in three separate phases: short-term emergency relief; mid-term rebuilding, counseling and construction; and long-term neighborhood development.

Now, 18 months into an ongoing program, we have found that some parts of our plan worked and others did not. We adjusted where we could and continued on. In fact, we have accomplished much.

We have met our financial goal and raised more than \$2 million for hurricane repair and rebuilding, with key support from NeighborWorks® America.

We have committed funds to or completed the repair or replacement of more than 100 homes, with a value of more than \$1 million, for the lowest-income families in our service area. We have kept our staff in the field for more than a year. We still have a store of more than \$1 million in grants for the next six to 12 months.

We've built major partnerships with local government, rebuilding committees, faith-based groups, and nonprofit agencies to jointly fund and repair or replace homes. These partnerships have become the foundation of our success.

LESSONS LEARNED

Any program of this scale runs into problems that can slow it down and limit its effectiveness. We surely ran into our share. But, hopefully, pointing out the lessons we learned will assist others in large-scale and expansive rebuilding and replacement efforts.

We were not successful in recruiting an architectural or engineering company to assess structures and prepare specifications for repair or replacement in the hurricane-damaged areas. Our attempts to recruit faith-based volunteers for this function were unsuccessful.

Consequently, we used our own staff, who had considerable construction experience, to do all job write-ups.

However, with the long hours they had to spend in the field and the paperwork they had to do to prepare bids and recruit contractors, our in-house construction staff frequently didn't have the time or the professional qualifications to do specifications and instructions for challenging structures.

Also, due to staff turnover, the quality of the write-up process changed. When licensed contractors or volunteers joined us to do rebuilding, they frequently did not agree with our staff regarding the scope of work, or the viability of repairs versus replacement. Professional write-ups by engineers or architects would have saved time and effort, and decreased our liability for construction decisions.

Get your own work crews on-staff, because they will pay for themselves in time gained, work accomplished, and job cost control.

After Andrew, we used our own general construction crews, because we were in our own home base and we are residential builders. We also had access to a guaranteed flow of volunteers, and a Department of Labor-paid work crew (National Emergency Grant) of more than 100 people.

In contrast, in our 2004 program, it is taking us double or triple the normal time to get work done, because of the lack of suitable contractors and volunteers. It has been almost impossible to consistently recruit general contractors to do our work. Furthermore, when contractors are found, their bids are exorbitantly high.

If volunteers can be obtained, they must be committed to a long-term schedule that they cannot break or change, as if they are under contract. If you can achieve this with volunteers, or paid staff, work will be a snap compared to bidding projects in the private sector. If work must be bid using outside contractors, package the jobs so that at least \$100,000 of work can be bid together. This will increase the chances of getting competent contractors to participate.

If funds cannot be readily found to pay for sizeable crews to complete work, an alternative would be to establish a



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for-profit or nonprofit independent sister organization that can bid on each job. This will keep other contractors' work within fair market price, and also allow you to award work to the sister organization if other bidders are too high or unresponsive. Centro did not organize its work this way unfortunately and we and our clients have suffered for it.

Depending on others for advocacy will hurt a rebuilding program.

The best way to get a clear picture of what a family really needs is to have advocates on-staff who can get answers in writing and make sure a family is getting the resources it deserves. Often, lawyers are needed to pry information out of agencies or insurance companies and to represent clients with resisting institutions. If we had a lawyer on retainer, we would have improved our performance drastically. Public legal service organizations and pro bono attorneys were swamped with work and too busy to help us.

Also, one highly trained and informed person on-staff must be designated as the spokesman for your nonprofit and the liaison to high levels in FEMA and others with resources. Each FEMA staff may have a different version of what FEMA may or may not be able to do in a particular case. Thus, one person representing your nonprofit must be designated to reach high into FEMA and other agencies for accurate policy answers and timely responses to appeals.

Train, train, train – and have a well-defined operation practiced before the program begins.

Schedule ongoing training on a regular basis to prevent the blind leading the blind. You may be impatient to begin providing relief, because people are in such great need, but having trained and effective staff and a very good communication network are key to early and sustained success under duress.

From the outset, our program had to contend with new untrained staff from the private sector doing our core work. Since no other nonprofit had worked in these rural areas, most newly recruited staff were unfamiliar with the modus operandi that we took for granted. They had to be trained in all our procedures, values and organizational culture – and trained in their daily tasks as well.

After the first six months, the original staff was replaced with a “second generation” staff, better equipped to carry out the challenging work. The second generation team was

more qualified and better trained, and is far more effective.

Expand fiscal and administrative staff as well as program staff in order to avoid slowdowns and over-work.

Centro rapidly expanded its program staff to undertake the hurricane repair and rebuilding program, but did not expand its administrative and fiscal staff to support their work. This led to bottlenecks in fiscal and reporting functions and overwork among the administrative staff in our home office.

Make sure adequate cash flow is available in greatly expanded amounts for your nonprofit before large-scale operations begin. Insist that funders respect this reality.

CONCLUSION

Overall, your efforts and those of very few others may be the only ones that meaningfully reach low-income areas where families have suffered so much. If you have well thought-out goals, strong advocacy, flexibility, and creative persistence, you will be successful.

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EPILOGUE

In October 2005, Hurricane Wilma – the strongest storm since Charley – knocked out our power for 10 days. Luckily, it did not do any damage to Desoto, Hardee and Polk Counties (hard hit by Charley, Jeanne and Frances in 2004). We had not finished our rebuilding there, so we can continue our efforts without interruption.

However, Wilma caused very serious damage in rural Palm Beach and Hendry Counties. They were much harder hit by Wilma than any other storm in more than 10 years. Villa Lago, our subdivision under gut rehab in the city of South Bay, which is in rural Palm Beach County, suffered some serious structural damage.

Farmworkers and rural low-income homeowners in South Bay, Belle Glade, and Pahokee, in Palm Beach County, as well as in Clewiston, in neighboring Hendry County, suffered tremendous damage to their housing. It is estimated that 75 percent of all mobile homes in South Bay, Clewiston, and Pahokee were severely damaged or completely destroyed.

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Relying on ‘Beacon Centers’ in Palm Beach County

BY PATRICK MCNAMARA



In 2004, both Frances and Jeanne hit the West Palm Beach area.

In recovering, NeighborWorks® affiliate **Housing Partnership Inc.** of Palm Beach County used an “Each-One-Reach-One” communications process to reach its clients, either by phone or in person.

So, when Hurricane Wilma hit last October, badly damaging Housing Partnership’s building, Housing Partnership relied on the county’s school-based Beacon Centers to help provide relief and distribute information.

“We learned from 2004’s experience that this was one of the ways that our efforts could be put to best use,” said Executive Director Patrick McNamara. Many people in these disenfranchised areas faced severe challenges in meeting basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing immediately after the hurricane.

A Beacon Center is basically a community center superimposed on the campus of a public school in a disenfranchised neighborhood. Palm Beach County has 14 Beacon Centers; Housing Partnership operates five of them. Many people in these disenfranchised neighborhoods, particularly in the “Glades” area, faced severe challenges in meeting basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing immediately after the hurricane.

One of the five in the Glades, the Pahokee Beacon Center, for example, is a partnership among the elementary and middle schools, community-based organizations, active residents and the center’s community advisory council. Beacon Centers’ after-school programs provide academic, social, recreational, and cultural activities in which youth can develop meaningful relationships with adults and peers, while improving their educational and leadership skills. The centers’ other programs provide a wide array of services to strengthen the entire family and community.



Hurricane debris forms a backdrop for (left to right) Brea, Nick and Emma McNamara.

Following Wilma, Beacon staff and youth leaders helped in distributing food, water and ice; preparing and serving meals at local shelters; distributing information on the location and eligibility of available services; and assisting applicants for cash voucher cards. Despite the damage to their building, Housing Partnership’s corporate office organized an effective clothing drive for the Pahokee and Belle Glade areas.

In addition, the center established a Beacon family hotline to serve area families and conducted a needs assessment to identify permanently displaced families.

It also planned and coordinated a “Parent Relief Day” to provide a day of food, fun, music and relaxation for parents and children without school, child care, or other outlets due to lack of water and power.

In turn, both the Pahokee Housing Authority and the city government used the Beacon Center to collect and distribute up-to-date information on needs and services. This effective communication process resulted in the center being awarded a \$20,000 grant from the local Community Foundation to distribute emergency rent and utility assistance, as well as over \$5000 in food vouchers for distribution.

The center is now turning its attention to the long-term recovery needs of the community. Housing Partnership is active in local meetings with faith-based groups, such as the Mennonite Volunteers, local government, and other community agencies to formalize plans to address the significant housing needs of the community.

And these were the efforts of just one of the Beacon Centers – the other centers also rose to the occasion, and their neighborhoods are now recovering. 

Reprinted, with permission, from *NeighborWorks America’s Bright Ideas* magazine. Patrick McNamara (pmcnamara@gocpg.org), is Executive Director of Community Services, Community Partnership Group, Housing Partnership, Inc.