

When the Hot Dishes Stop Coming

The '97 Flood Clearinghouse: An Evaluation

**Performed for the Bush Foundation
Saint Paul, Minnesota**

**By Dagleish & Associates
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I. Summary and Overview

*“I remember back to when my father died,
and it was after the hot dishes stopped coming,
that it was gone out of the minds of people.
The Flood Clearinghouse was there for us at that important time,
when the hot dishes stopped coming. It provided us with the support
we needed as we have worked our way through recovery.”
A Recipient*

A rough estimate of \$2.5 million dollars in monetary, volunteer, and material support was distributed to nonprofit organizations and families rebuilding their homes, schools, churches, and businesses after the 500-year flood that occurred in 1997 and effected communities throughout the Red River and Minnesota River valleys in Minnesota and North Dakota. The support was garnered through a unique program designed to gather and exchange information about needs, those that had not been met through established programs like FEMA, with individuals and organizations with resources and an interest in helping.

Called the ‘97 Flood Clearinghouse, the idea emerged from a series of discussions among foundations in Minnesota and community leaders in Grand Forks and other towns affected by the flood. The Bush Foundation in St. Paul, Minnesota, who led the discussions, provided a grant to the Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation (FMAF) to establish the Clearinghouse. Two primary components were identified: a needs assessment to develop an inventory of organizations’ specific needs and a matchmaking phase to identify potential contributors and inform them of the program and areas in which they could assist. The central vehicle for organizing the data and making it accessible to funders was a website. The FMAF identified a consultant to manage the needs assessment, and a Twin Cities-based consultant, who reported to the Bush Foundation, managed the matchmaking piece.

An informal goal of \$1 million was established, and aid was identified in the form of cash, donated products, and volunteers. The needs ranged from capital and program support to emergency and quality of life concerns for social service agencies, arts organizations, schools, churches, food banks, day care providers, youth programs, and recreation centers, among others.

But beyond the actual aid itself, the Clearinghouse provided benefits that extended the value of money or products. The human contact, expression of care, and the act of listening and genuinely seeking to understand were forms of support many felt were at least as important, if not more so, than the money itself. Perhaps the value of this humanitarian aid was so pronounced because it arrived months after the flood, in the period of rebuilding when public attention had subsided and people began to feel forgotten and discouraged. As one individual put it, the Clearinghouse arrived “when the hot dishes stopped coming.” More often than not, in a series of interviews, people were mentioned as being the most valuable resource of the ‘97 Flood Clearinghouse.

The Clearinghouse was set up to be simple, flexible, and accessible. The application forms were short and easy to complete. The system allowed for adjustments as new needs emerged and known needs changed. Any organization experiencing effects from the flood could apply with any request; no judgment was made about what was acceptable.

As a result a wide variety of needs were met by broad range of contributors. While the majority of funding came from some 22 private, corporate, and family foundations, numerous individuals, community organizations, and some businesses also provided support. The total amount that was identified and recorded was \$2,146,692, including \$716,600 from a special partnership of the Bush and the Otto Bremer Foundations. Some \$2.5 million has been identified as a best guess estimate of the total possible support generated through the Clearinghouse, but since the concept was to exchange information only, it is impossible to know the actual amount. Without any doubt, though, the Clearinghouse proved to be cost effective, less than the average administrative cost per dollar of income of a typical United Way program raising the same amount.

This report is the result of an evaluation that was carried out by the Minneapolis-based firm, Dalglish & Associates. The centerpiece of the evaluation was a series of interviews with 51 individuals representing community leadership in Grand Forks and the surrounding area; organizations that received support; groups that did not receive support; the unmet needs committees of both states; and foundations, businesses, and community groups that provided monetary and material support along with volunteers and individual contributors. Representatives of the Bush Foundation and the FMAF and the program managers also were interviewed. Altogether the interviews represented about 30 percent of the known recipients and contributors. In addition, reports from the coordinators were reviewed, and the information gathered from their reports and the website was analyzed.

Most of the comments from those interviewed were extremely positive about the impact of the Clearinghouse and the way it was managed. Areas of possible improvement mentioned included stronger and broader based communications to potential contributors, additional support in the area of matchmaking, and a longer time line for the project. One weak area of support was in donated product from businesses. Most of those who were asked specifically about this issue felt, in retrospect, the Clearinghouse staff should have abandoned their efforts to solicit donated products and redirected their efforts to proven areas success.

In addition to these comments, most of those interviewed were confused about the structure of the Clearinghouse or the roles of the project managers. Few had any understanding of the different components of the project. And there appeared to be some minor internal communications problems, most of which probably could have been improved with a clearer organizational structure. However, these concerns didn't seem to impair the ultimate results.

The '97 Flood Clearinghouse, which officially began in October 1997, came to a close eight months later in June 1998. Hopefully there will not be a reason to give birth to it again in this part of the country. But natural disasters continue to devastate communities in other parts of the country, and it is the hope that the lessons learned from this experience can be helpful to

others seeking to provide assistance in those places. This report serves as not only a review of accomplishments for the Bush Foundation and others involved in this project, but also as a kind of blueprint for another community seeking to successfully survive nature's wrath.

II. Project Background

*“The ‘97 Flood Clearinghouse is a center for exchanging information about unmet needs resulting from the flood of 1997 with donors interested in supporting continuing recovery and reconstruction efforts.”
Clearinghouse Fact Sheet*

In the weeks immediately following the April 1997 flood, families, small businesses, large corporations, foundations, and community organizations from the Twin Cities, the upper Midwest, and throughout the entire country sent support to the Red River and Minnesota River valleys in the form of monetary contributions, cleaning materials, clothing, food, and materials for rebuilding. Those contributions were distributed as fairly as possible, and committees were set up by the governments in both Minnesota and North Dakota to address the process of rebuilding their communities and identifying unmet needs throughout the recovery period.

In the Twin Cities, foundations and other grant-making organizations exchanged information about the disaster relief work they had done in the initial weeks and months following the flood through meetings convened by the Minnesota Council on Foundations. In numerous discussions, foundation executives explored the ways they could be most helpful to the disaster area. One of the issues that emerged in these discussions concerned identifying the organizations where funds were most needed. Funders often asked “How do you know what is needed and who needs it?” There was no central place to go for such information, especially in the chaotic months immediately following the flood.

During this period, the Bush Foundation Board of Directors voted to contribute \$10,000 to the Red Cross for flood relief efforts in April 1997, and at its annual meeting in June, a sub-committee of the Board was established to address continuing concerns related to flood recovery. Early in its discussions, the Board acknowledged the unusual nature of this disaster, expressing an interest in participating, but at the same time not wanting to establish a standard practice of providing disaster relief or recovery assistance. Under those circumstances, an informal, temporary program could be considered and an opportunity for re-granting would be explored. The Bush Board also decided that the focus of support should be on recovery rather than relief.

The Otto Bremer Foundation, located in St. Paul, was one funder with interests in that area that had a framework for a system in place. Extending a program it had established two years earlier to address natural disasters occurring at the time, Bremer distributed a one-page form through its local banks to organizations needing financial assistance. Those forms were returned to the banks and sent to the Foundation, which in turn made granting decisions. In the initial months following the disaster, the Bush Foundation joined Bremer in its efforts by contributing funds in the amount of \$2 million, increasing the total resources available through the Bremer system to \$3.9 million.

Concurrent to the Twin Cities meetings and the establishment of the “Bush-Bremer

Partnership,” discussions led by the Bush Foundation with Grand Forks leaders and Minnesota foundations identified the ways in which Twin Cities organizations could make a difference. Through these discussions the idea emerged of a central clearinghouse where the unmet needs of the affected communities could be identified and publicized. Information about these organizations and their needs could then be made available to individuals, businesses, foundations, and community service groups, who could provide assistance directly.

The Bush Foundation took the lead and identified two major components of the clearinghouse concept: a needs assessment to develop an inventory of organization’s specific needs and a matchmaking piece to stimulate giving based on the needs identified. The Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation (FMAF), a community foundation, was invited by the Bush Foundation to organize and manage the needs assessment and establish a base for the Clearinghouse. The FMAF was identified as the ideal home for the Clearinghouse for a variety of reasons. A community foundation by its very nature serves both the community of donors and the community-at-large through its nonprofit organizations resulting in a strong collaborative relationship. As Jan Ulferts Stewart, executive director the FMAF reflects, “a community foundation works with nonprofits in a caring, neighborly fashion, and as a funder, it has strong relationships with other funders. It serves as the great connector,” a position that seemed ideal for a clearinghouse. Because the FMAF provided services to both Fargo and Moorhead, it represented both North Dakota and Minnesota. Further, it was geographically located in the center of the flood-impacted area, while at the same time being located in a community not having had the lion’s share of damage. The Clearinghouse could keep a close, but objective distance from Grand Forks, where some 85 percent of the damage occurred.

The grant was made to the FMAF, and a consultant was retained to carry out the matchmaking component, identifying potential contributors and providing them with basic information about organizations and their needs to encourage participation. A total of \$150,000 was granted for the administration of the entire project, and an informal goal of one million dollars was identified.

The FMAF retained consultant Dr. Deb Gebeke to manage the needs assessment and information management aspect of the Clearinghouse at the Foundation offices in Fargo ND. The Bush Foundation identified Jane Stamstad, a St. Paul-based consultant to foundations, to serve as the matchmaker. Throughout the project period Gebeke and Stamstad worked closely complementing each other’s efforts and providing additional support in their respective areas of responsibility.

The Needs Assessment

Leaders in each of the impacted communities were contacted in October 1997 to identify key individuals and organizations to assist with the needs assessment by informing area nonprofit and recovery support organizations about the Clearinghouse. Any organization could participate, and early on in the process, the Clearinghouse staff decided that no limitations would be set about *what* could be included in the needs assessment or *who* could list a request.

Meetings were organized in each community to provide information about the

Clearinghouse and to distribute applications and other descriptive materials. Key organizations such as the United Way, University of North Dakota Center for Innovation, Child Care Resource and Referral, Lutheran Social Services, and the unmet needs committees in both states were specifically contacted by Gebeke and asked to circulate information about the meetings and encourage others to attend. These agencies contributed to the process of collecting needs as they distributed applications and carried out much of the follow up with area agencies. (The United Way executive director in Grand Forks, for example, periodically checked the Clearinghouse website for information about her member agencies and contacted those groups that had not yet signed up.) To support these efforts, the media was contacted about the establishment of the Clearinghouse and the meetings, and announcements were mailed to nonprofit organizations throughout the Valley.

The inventory packet included a two-page, one-sheet form that requested contact and basic descriptive information, a brief summary of need in 100 words or less, a list of other funders approached, and a basic project budget. A copy of the form is included in the appendix. Each packet of information also included a list of typical questions and answers along with an introductory letter. Once the inventory form was received by the Clearinghouse, the applicant received a postcard acknowledging receipt of the form and requesting that the organization keep the Clearinghouse informed of changes in their needs.

The primary organizing and information distribution tool was a website located at www.floodclearinghouse.org. The first, text-only version of the website was up and running on November 19, 1997. A month later the site was upgraded to include graphics. Limited sorting capabilities were a part of the site; however, no links to other sites or photographs were included. Needs were organized by type of organization (social services, childcare, arts, recreation, etc.). There was also the capability to sort by successful matches and remaining needs.

Matchmaking: Identifying and Communicating with Potential Contributors

Jane Stamstad identified three areas in which she would seek available resources: cash contributions, skilled and unskilled volunteers, and donated products. In addition, she identified individuals to provide technical assistance to Grand Forks area nonprofits. As a means of organizing the types of needs listed and communicating those needs to potential contributors, priority areas were established including emergency needs/social services, childcare, the arts, education, rural needs, and the faith community. Clustering needs by these understandable themes became an effective way to communicate with potential funders, helping them to identify areas of interest and providing in-depth background about a situation, which could be addressed readily by specific organizations. Additional research focusing on a particular priority area was carried out as necessary, which was more efficient than researching each individual organization.

Potential cash contributors were initially identified through Stamstad's network of clients, colleagues, and friends. Eventually her circle of contacts broadened through word-of-mouth. Beyond Stamstad's personal network, the Minnesota Council on Foundations distributed information about the Clearinghouse through its meetings and newsletters; and, members of that organization were also informed of periodic briefings about flood recovery work, which were held at the Bush Foundation offices. Members could also opt to receive bi-weekly faxes about

the Clearinghouse, which included updates about successful matches and immediate needs. The "Friday Fax" was initiated in January 1998 and continued through May 1998. Media coverage, both in the Twin Cities and in communities up and down the Red River Valley, generated some interest and subsequent contributions, much of which was handled through the Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation office and Deb Gebeke. Stamstad also made presentations on occasion before groups of trustees, individual family members of wealth, and church and education groups.

Volunteers were recruited initially by contacting the Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity. Posters, flyers, and sign-up sheets were distributed at the organization's fall 1997 regional meeting outlining the need for skilled and unskilled carpenters, sheet rock installers, plumbers, and electricians. Habitat volunteers were asked to hand out flyers at their respective workplaces and post them on the Internet or in employee newsletters. Sources of donated products were identified primarily through Stamstad's personal and business contacts and through the Internet.

Trips were arranged by Stamstad in which potential major contributors visited Grand Forks to get a firsthand look at the devastation from the flood and to hear directly from nonprofit leaders about their needs. Several trips were arranged between October 1997 and March 1998.

The project was originally scheduled for completion in March 1998. When it became clear that many organizations were still identifying and revising needs and that more time was required for generating additional support, the time line was extended. Needs were added to the website through April 1998 and matchmaking officially continued through May 1998. In reality, Stamstad continued her work through June and responded to inquiries throughout the summer. The website was available through July 1998.

III. The Most Valuable Aspects of the Clearinghouse

“The level of stress, the level of anxiety, some of the fears - especially among people accustomed to a routine life - became magnified. To have that outreach was a benefit beyond dollar value. When you hear a real voice and then a person comes into the community - it makes all the difference.” A Recipient

The primary means of carrying out this evaluation was through a series of interviews, most of which were conducted over the phone. Altogether 51 individuals were interviewed including the project coordinators; community leaders in Grand Forks; the directors of organizations that received support, groups that did *not* receive support, and contributing organizations; and individuals who donated on a personal level. A list of those who were interviewed is included in the appendix of this report. In order to create an atmosphere for frank discussion, all of the interviews are confidential. Each person was asked to describe the way(s) in which he or she first heard about the Clearinghouse. They expressed their opinions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the project, shared ideas about what could have been improved, and critiqued the website specifically. Other areas of interest were explored, such as donated products and volunteers, depending on the background and involvement of the individual interviewed.

In exploring the strengths of the project, the interviewees were asked to identify those aspects of the Clearinghouse they thought were the most valuable. Most could not name just one. Few stopped short of mentioning the human dimensions of the project. In compiling all the comments, seven common themes emerged.

* * *

The Human Dimension

“Jane Stamstad was like an angel from heaven...” “Deb! That’s what made it work. It didn’t feel like a system.” The two people charged with identifying the needs and making the matches were mentioned repeatedly, and perhaps the most often, as the most important resource of the Clearinghouse. Not only did they facilitate a program to support the recovery process, just as many others did, they performed their jobs in a “sympathetic, concerned, personable, calm, understanding, informed” manner. “They made it work with their openness and hospitality,” one person said. “We never sensed any judgment. There were times when they may have had to say “that’s a little beyond our scope” in response to a request, but they’d also say “we’ll see what we can do.”

Their passion seemed to drive the process. And their humanity helped provide a sense of focus, we were told. “At the Clearinghouse they were very understanding, very calm, which a lot of us weren’t at the time. They helped us relax and think more clearly, provide more direction,” observed one recipient. “Deb had time for everybody’s questions and concerns,” said another. And while a passionate concern for people can sometimes be misdirected, “they didn’t

get our hopes up. They just told us what they were working on and kept working on it.” This realistic approach helped soften the blow for those who did not receive help through the Clearinghouse.

Gebeke and Stamstad were also knowledgeable about important issues, like childcare and the arts, mentioned often in the interviews. If information was not readily at hand, according to one of the contributors, research was carried out quickly and thoroughly.

Simple, Flexible, and Accessible Process

“It was like one-stop shopping.” The application process was designed to be simple, flexible and accessible. Unlike most formal grant-making systems, “there was one contact, one sheet of paper, and one person to serve as a kind of consultant. The organizations didn’t need to do the research to find help. This was all valuable,” offered a contributor. “It allowed a circumventing of the normal process.” All the recipients agreed that the form was short and easy to complete. And when there were questions, they were answered quickly. The organization in need could make one request in its effort to reach many potential supporters. And the contributors could go to one source to learn the various ways in which they could help. Numerous contributors provided funds and products to more than one organization, and many recipients received support from more than one supporter.

Not only was the process simple, but the system allowed for adjustments. One of the issues frequently mentioned was the difficulty in initially identifying needs. The size and types of needs were constantly fluctuating. The Clearinghouse provided a means for adjusting needs as they were discovered, updating the information on the website, and making changes in how information was presented to potential funders.

Neutral, Fair and Equitable

“There were many flood relief efforts, but no entity to tie all of this together. So the concept of the Clearinghouse was very needed,” said a community leader in Grand Forks. He continued to explain that people from all over the country were offering support in a variety of ways. While the assistance was welcomed, the community was in chaos, and there was no means in the beginning of coordinating, managing or channeling the support in a fair and equitable way. The Clearinghouse helped to rectify earlier inequities and resolve bad feelings that had developed as a result.

As the Clearinghouse uncovered as many organizations with needs as possible, it established a policy early on not to pass judgment about what was considered necessary or more important. “It was nice not to have arbitrary limits on what we could say we needed or to have to come up with any rationale why our need was excruciatingly critical as opposed to others.” To further support that approach, needs could be adjusted. “We could be quite current as we discovered new needs or as we found our needs changing.”

People and organizations offering support of any size were treated as equitably as those who were seeking needs. One religious-based organization worked with its young people to

provide contributions in the form of toys. The woman who spearheaded this project commented that, “you don’t have to be a big philanthropic organization to make a contribution. This was the lesson we showed our kids. Deb was sensitive to our children wanting to connect with other children, and she facilitated finding the schools (for our gifts.) I’m sure she worked with larger scale projects, but she took the time to figure out our project too.” This democratic approach demonstrated that the Clearinghouse organizers understood the factors that make a community so valuable are not necessarily the most visible or even newsworthy.

Information Sharing

“The coordination and information sharing was a very important part of it.” Immediately following the flood, North Dakota and Minnesota established flood relief agencies to manage and coordinate government support, to assist families and businesses in applying for that support, and to identify unmet needs. Their first concerns were basic infrastructure and family support. As these needs were addressed, they could direct their attention to identifying the many needs unmet by government sources or other private forms of support.

By the fall of 1997 the Clearinghouse was carrying out a piece of the unmet needs research. As a result, the agency directors had additional, unexpected support to assist them in their own research and allow them to refocus on other pressing areas. For example, the North Dakota State Disaster Response Coordinator reported that she was able to invest more energy in assisting farmers and those in the rural communities, while allowing the Clearinghouse staff to focus on the Red River Valley. “In the middle of a crisis you don’t know which way is up or down. And the Clearinghouse was able to take that ball and run with it so we could concentrate on our immediate recovery,” the coordinator of the North Dakota program said.

Information also was shared with major contributors like Lutheran Brotherhood, which was managing its own \$3.1 million flood relief project. They found it helpful to verify information with the Clearinghouse staff as well as direct some of its funding to nonprofit organizations listed on the website.

The Spiritual Lift

“One of the biggest pluses was mentally what it did for people up here, the boost that it gives when someone calls and says, ‘This is what we’ll do for you.’ They gave us a boost to start the day that far exceeds the monetary support. Don’t lose sight of that mental lift.” Gebeke and Stamstad began to notice in conversations with applicants that they were providing a kind of therapeutic service that they had not expected. While not everyone considered emotional relief to be important, for those who benefited spiritually, the “therapy was worth a lot and it still is. That was a real unexpected benefit.”

Credibility of the Bush Foundation

The cachet of the Bush Foundation opened the doors to potential contributors, reported Stamstad. Knowing the Foundation’s commitment to the project combined with its reputation lent

credibility to an idea that had been untested. Further, community leaders and recipients in the Grand Forks area appreciated the Bush Foundation's past experience in the region as a grantor, its knowledge of the key players and community concerns, which were mentioned as an asset to the program.

New Relationships

"The friendships and connections we made through the Clearinghouse far exceeded my expectations. The Clearinghouse helped us to establish a number of really helpful professional relationships." Several of the recipients, especially the arts organizations, talked about the new friends they had made through the Clearinghouse. In one instance the Minneapolis Youth Symphony (MYS) offered to share its music library with the Grand Forks Symphony (GFS). The GFS executive director said the generosity of the MYS "changed the level of the music activity for our youth overnight." The Minneapolis-based James Sewell Ballet and the Grand Forks Ballet have continued a relationship as a result of the efforts made by the Sewell company to raise funds for the ballet and the arts in Grand Forks. Several Twin Cities nonprofit leaders went to Grand Forks to offer advice and facilitate technical workshops. "The site visits, the sharing of information and idea generation - they were wonderful." Again, these connections were at least as important as the funds: "One of the most positive aspects was the friends and contacts we made in the Twin Cities. They listened to us and understood what we were going through. It was uplifting to have them visit. Even if no money came out of it, we still felt so good."

* * *

A calm sense of structure, a fair objective approach, and a humane and understanding passion seemed to drive the success of the Clearinghouse more than anything else. When asked what was especially valuable, people were mentioned far more than dollars, not only from among those who received assistance, but from those who provided support as well. And the several organizations interviewed that received no assistance through the Clearinghouse echoed these same sentiments.

As one recipient summed it up: The personal touch that was brought to the process helped us get through this overwhelming stage of recovery. "What made it work so well were these things: it was easy and user friendly, there was follow up, it made a lot sense, and there was personal attention. And it was the personal attention that helped motivate us."

IV. Areas for Improvement

*“It was the best kept secret in philanthropy.”
Foundation Executive*

Among those interviewed, there were few criticisms of the Clearinghouse. Many found it difficult to pinpoint weaknesses and most struggled to identify areas that could be improved in the event of a future incarnation of the Clearinghouse. The few areas of improvement identified by the recipients, contributors, and community leaders included the timing and length of the project itself and the need for better communications, especially in reaching potential contributors. Gebeke and Stamstad also listed these two areas in their reports and added two others: the need for additional time and support for increasing cash contributions and for improving results in generating donated products and volunteer transportation.

No other specific areas of improvement were mentioned with any frequency, with the exception of the website, which will be discussed more fully in the first section of this chapter.

Communications

Communications strategies were designed for both components: the needs assessment and matchmaking phase. In the needs assessment, communications tactics were intended to reach community leaders in the Red River Valley, agencies addressing or collecting information about unmet needs, and nonprofit organizations with needs. The primary audiences for the matchmaking phase were people and organizations with financial resources and potential interest in providing support, businesses that could contribute products and services, and skilled and unskilled volunteers.

In carrying out the needs assessment, a variety of methods were used. Community leaders and agency directors were contacted about the specifics of the Clearinghouse who would in turn spread the word to other nonprofits. Flyers were mailed announcing the information meetings about the inventory of needs. And the media was contacted about the meetings as well as the Clearinghouse idea. All of these strategies, including the meetings themselves, effectively reached a broad range of organizations.

Only one criticism emerged in the discussions about the needs assessment. One individual strongly felt that the project managers “did not spend enough time in Grand Forks to get to know the players and make it readily accessible for those who needed it most. There was a lack of communication with the target audience.” He felt that there needed to be “more aggressive outreach in the Red River Valley.” The way to accomplish that, he said, would have been to locate the Clearinghouse “in Grand Forks where 85 percent of the need was.” This interviewee expressed concern that many nonprofits did not connect to the Clearinghouse, especially those without staff.

Despite these strong feelings, no other evidence of this problem surfaced in the

evaluation. In fact, one individual commented that “the Clearinghouse had become a fairly common number in this area.” Others in Grand Forks voluntarily mentioned that they felt the Clearinghouse was more appropriately located outside of the Grand Forks area: “It’s important to have the distance because they weren’t in the same level of recovery that we were in.” Another said that the Clearinghouse was able to “stay out of the local politics, maintaining its sense of neutrality,” by being based in the Fargo- Moorhead community.

While the Clearinghouse staff would like to have spent more time doing outreach, staffing resources did not allow for it. Further, it made a decision early on to be *reactive* rather than *proactive* in order to maintain its focused, objective role, which proved to be a major strength of the program. It is more than likely that organizations, especially those without staff, could have fallen through the cracks. However, considering the limited time and resources for this project, it appears as though a fairly broad and effective net was cast through direct communication and word of mouth to reach most organizations with needs.

The communications strategy to reach more potential contributors could have been improved, many said. While Stamstad’s approach to contact her extensive network of friends, clients and colleagues and to work with the foundation community was extremely successful, other potential groups of contributors were left out. Both Stamstad and Gebeke identified the need for improved media coverage as one solution for reaching a broader base of support. Since there was no one individual with the time or expertise to address media relations, news coverage was sporadic, at best. The Clearinghouse staff responded to inquiries from the media, but did not have the resources to aggressively pursue media coverage. Both Gebeke and Stamstad cite public relations and more publicly based communications “to be seriously lacking.” As one foundation executive said, “It was the best kept secret in philanthropy.”

Beyond improved media coverage, others felt more could have been done to generate support through other nonprofits in the Twin Cities. While some efforts were made, especially among the arts groups, with a more focused strategy for reaching other community organizations additional contributions probably would have been forthcoming. According to one group located in North Dakota, the Clearinghouse “needed to contact more community organizations and give them a list of the various needs. The Clearinghouse seemed aimed towards bigger funding organizations. But out in a rural area like ours, it’s good to be able to participate in something like this. We want to help.”

The student who raised funds through her school had a similar comment. “Just ask for help and get in touch with schools. If they asked the schools, I know they would help. Students really want to get involved in helping out with causes like this, but no one ever asks us.” These “grassroots” efforts are time consuming and would have required additional staff time, but are worth seriously considering, especially in a targeted, focused approach.

The website, which was used primarily as an information management tool, was also intended to be a primary tool and source of information for those interested in providing resources. However, most contributors relied on direct personal contact with the Clearinghouse staff and only occasionally referred to the website for information or made decisions based on it. Stamstad also noted that more time was spent working directly with potential contributors than

she had anticipated, expecting that people would utilize the website more frequently to make their decisions.

In fact, the website seemed to be more useful to the applicants, who often checked it to compare current needs against what they had originally requested. Certainly some support came from curious individuals visiting the website, but, without a thorough survey, it is difficult to know just how useful it was in actually generating contributions without personal solicitation and follow up.

Of those who did use the website, a number of suggestions for improvement were offered. Several felt that its design should have had more “pizzazz.” “The website was pretty boring and factual and should have used graphics, photos, and color to attract attention. It looked like it was run by bureaucrats rather than energetic go-getters.” Aware that the site was uninteresting to look at, Gebeke, in her report, said that the Clearinghouse team “made a decision *not* to add some of the other items that we originally thought about such as links to other sites, photos, etc. Due to the short period the site would be used, it did not seem to be cost effective to add more graphics in the eyes of the key users (funders) contacted about these changes.”

Other suggestions for improvements included more sophisticated sorting capabilities and opportunities for links to other sites as well as e-mail access to people with information about the applicants.

While the website was utilized for basic information, motivation to contribute came from human interaction itself. The website was an effective support tool, but it was *not* a substitute for matchmaking, in most cases. Had more funders actually used the website as a central part of their decision making process, a graphically more interesting website probably would have been effective.

Among those who attended the briefings and received the Friday Fax, both sources of information were generally helpful, but, again, most received information through Clearinghouse staff, often before attending the briefings or receiving the fax. However, the mix of tools used to distribute information - the briefings, the fax, the website, the media, and the personal contact - proved to be useful to contributors. People could access information in the ways that were most accessible to them and the repetition reinforced decision making.

For those who actually visited Grand Forks and met with community representatives, the trips were central to their interest in participating. Passion quickly and easily swelled within those who had this first-hand experience. And those individuals often passed their stories and sense of compassion on to others, stimulating an interest in giving that grew exponentially. Again, human interaction was key to “making the sale” - to developing contributions.

Additional Matchmaking Support

For different reasons, both Gebeke and Stamstad felt the program could have been strengthened if there had been additional support in the area of matchmaking. Gebeke said in her report, “The

matchmaker could begin part-time and then go full-time. Also, using more than one part-time matchmaker might make it possible for each to focus on a certain type of match, such as foundation work and product donations or volunteers. It was not feasible for one person to do it all and cover all the areas that could have been taken advantage of in this situation....another person would have had other contacts to call upon. As gaps emerged, new approaches or strategies could have been developed to target contributions.”

In Stamstad’s report, she recommended that a broker be hired on a full-time basis, “or two brokers, each on a half-time basis, for the initial six to eight months following a natural disaster, then 10 to 12 hours per week for an additional two to four months. This time frame is required to cultivate more local, regional and national donor prospects and obtain more donated product.”

Others interviewed also felt opportunities were missed by having only one part-time matchmaker soliciting support and closing the match. By having two matchmakers, each with different strengths and experiences, more ground could have been covered, spreading the appeal to encompass a diverse body of contributors. While having a second matchmaker to address donated product and volunteers may have been productive, in the case of the ‘97 Clearinghouse, more support may have been generated by having a second matchmaker working a broader network including individuals, nonprofit groups, and small businesses. Part of the reasoning for this approach will be discussed in the next section about donated product and volunteers.

Donated Product and Volunteers

The Clearinghouse had set out to identify not only cash contributions, but also volunteers to help rebuild houses and provide technical assistance and donated products, especially building supplies and equipment such as computers. While they were able to locate a fairly steady stream of volunteers, finding on-going transportation for the volunteers and identifying product were more difficult than originally anticipated. While it was not possible, within the limitations of this evaluation to pursue this question more fully, the issues raised in the interviews include the following:

- A number of businesses provided support in a variety of ways immediately following the flood. Eventually they felt that they had made their contribution and discontinued support.
- The tornado in St. Peter, Minnesota and disasters in other parts of the country drew attention away from the ‘97 flood recovery.
- People at the “top” running the businesses needed to be approached, not the middle management. (In a number of cases, however, CEOs were contacted.)
- Businesses needed to see evidence of the destruction, both through photographs and perhaps a video as well as through direct contact with people living in the areas effected by the flood. Ideally the leaders needed to see the destruction firsthand in order to “pull at their heart strings.”
- Raising contributed product requires a mindset different from raising funds and, therefore, a different approach.

- People want to deliver material directly to the source. They are skeptical about where it will actually go.
- The economy has been very good and products are selling. Businesses are not going to give away what they can sell, especially when they are having to generate more product to meet the existing demand.
- Systems were already established to manage volunteers and solicit donated product. The Clearinghouse was duplicating efforts in these particular areas that were unnecessary.

With the limited amount of information available about this particular aspect, based on the comments made, in retrospect the Clearinghouse may have been more productive by focusing on cash contributions and accepting products as they were offered. In an effort to support others working with volunteers and soliciting donated products, the Clearinghouse may have been more successful identifying funds that could have been used for purchasing product and/or leveraging reduced prices for product. Or the Clearinghouse and other entities focusing on donated product and volunteers could have worked together, reinforcing each other's efforts by focusing on their respective strengths.

Timing of the Project

The one area in which there was little agreement was in the timing of the project, when it should have started and when it should have ended. Some felt that "a little bit earlier might have helped" while others felt "it started at about the right time. People were too overwhelmed (during the summer). Fall was a better time." Others believed it would have been useful if it had been set up relatively soon after the disaster, "as long as it would be possible to take into consideration that the needs will change." Another said that "July would have been a good start time. April, May and June was the period of panic calls. By July people had begun to settle down and identify needs."

Among the contributors, an earlier start time was necessary, they said, in order to take advantage of the window of opportunity when people are most aware of the disaster and subsequent recovery needs. They felt that too many had forgotten and lost interest in providing support eight to 12 months after the flood, and as a result, opportunities were lost.

As for when it should have ended, both recipients and contributors said that it came to an end too soon. Most identified a 12 to 18 month period as ideal for the Clearinghouse. Nearly everyone felt that the program should have been active through the fall of 1998. "The timeline needed to be longer," said one recipient. "From the perspective of understanding the needs, you can't do that right away. The needs are so immediate and basic at first. It was nine to 12 months post-disaster when we really started to understand our needs."

Considering the magnitude of disaster resulting from a 500-year flood, it does not seem unreasonable that a longer time line would have been appropriate. There was some concern about encouraging a sense of dependency. For that and other reasons, nearly everyone interviewed said that the Clearinghouse needed to have an end date; "it should not be available for an undefined period of time." But, a minimum of a year seemed acceptable and appropriate to most.

Project Structure and Organizational Accountability

From the interviews, some groups were confused about the program's organizational structure, unsure if they were working with the Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation (FMAF) or the Bush Foundation. Few seemed to have an understanding of how the needs assessment and matchmaking components worked together, including some who were involved in the early planning for the Clearinghouse. The perception by some who were most informed was that the FMAF was the home of the Clearinghouse, which was concerned about assessing the needs and managing the website - an accurate perception. The matchmaking piece, on the other hand, was ultimately directed by the Bush Foundation through consultant Stamstad. However, some did not seem to understand the relationship between FMAF and Stamstad. For some it was not clear who or what organization was ultimately accountable for the project. Was it the Bush Foundation, which created and funded the project, or was it the FMAF, which received a grant for the project and was considered the home of the Clearinghouse? Those are the kinds of questions that emerged as a result of the interviews.

Considering that the project was based in two cities, some communications problems were inevitable, as they are reported to have been. In the end, however, Stamstad and Gebeke apparently worked well together and exchanged information about the work in progress on a regular basis. Most of the people who were interviewed agreed that the needs assessment was properly located in Fargo, and all agreed that the matchmaking consultant needed to be based in the Twin Cities. As a new idea designed to respond quickly to the needs of a disaster situation, it seems inevitable that the organizational structure was not going to be worked out in detail. Those creating and managing the project were inventing the system as the project evolved.

These questions and concerns certainly did not interfere with the success of the project. But the question of accountability and daily management and coordination of the two components is worth considering should a project of this nature be developed at another time, in another place.

* * *

Considering the brief period of time to develop the Clearinghouse concept, organize it, and actually manage the project, it is surprising that not more areas were identified for improvement. Most of the weaknesses mentioned centered around the need for more time. Time, in most instances, could only be made available with increased resources rather than making more efficient use of available time. Communications could have been improved with the time and expertise made available by adding a communications consultant. More and more diverse matches could have been made by increasing matchmaking time and resources. And more needs might have been identified and addressed by increasing the length of the project itself.

V. Accomplishments

“I have so much respect for Bush and how they approached this. Instead of dumping money without good information, they addressed how to make it work in the best possible way. They were willing to connect with enough good people with day to day involvement, understanding and knowledge.”
Community Leader in the Region

The primary goal and purpose of the Clearinghouse was to provide a single central place where information about needs could be collected and shared with people and organizations with interest and resources to provide assistance. As the project evolved, the Clearinghouse staff developed a list of “goals” that acknowledged the reality of what they were actually accomplishing. Those accomplishments included:

- exchange information about unmet recovery needs
- uncover gaps in support
- serve as a facilitator/catalyst for addressing gaps in support
- provide up-to-date information to interested donors
- reduce duplicative funding efforts
- reduce paperwork and timelines typical of the grant process
- support the need for therapeutic listening among organizations with need
- document/monitor the progress of recovery work
- expedite flood recovery work
- create successful matches between those with needs and those interested in supporting flood recovery work

In terms of an informal, but tangible, quantitative goal, the project identified \$1 million in contributions. According to Stamstad’s July 1998 report, the Clearinghouse generated \$2,146,629 in cash and in-kind donations from 147 individuals, corporations, and foundations. That total includes \$716,600 from 30 Bush-Bremer Partnership grants. Some 201 matches were made between contributors and various nonprofit organizations in the flood-affected communities in North Dakota and Minnesota. However, because it was not possible to identify all the matches made as a result of the efforts of the Clearinghouse project, the Bush Foundation estimates that actual contributions likely reached or exceeded \$2.5 million. Among the organizations interviewed, several suspected a number of contributions received came to them as a result of the Clearinghouse efforts; however, they had no evidence to this effect and did not report those contributions to the Clearinghouse staff.

For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to accurately examine the total quantitative impact of the Clearinghouse. Since the Clearinghouse was intended only to collect and disseminate information about needs, it was not always possible to keep track of all matches, despite efforts to the contrary. Many matches may have occurred as a result of or in part because of the

website, word of mouth, media announcements, or other communications efforts initiated by the Clearinghouse, but were never reported or the recipient was not made aware of the catalyst for a gift received. The sheer management of the website was an enormous task for a small, part time staff. But based on the available information, a snapshot of the requests and how they were met can be examined.

In July 1998, a month after the program officially ended, the website listed a total of \$2,105,362 in successful matches and \$9,201,280 in remaining needs for a grand total of \$11,126,642. (Stamstad listed matches as \$2,146,629 in her report, which is due to additional matches occurring after May 31, when the Clearinghouse was officially closed. Because matches continued after the last website update, there are some discrepancies in figures provided by Stamstad and those gathered from the website.)

A study of the final results of needs met and needs remaining by category is listed below. While this information is not conclusive, it provides some understanding of the results of the needs assessment and matchmaking activity.

Category	Total Needs Met	Total Needs Remaining	Total Requested	% of Needs Met
Arts	\$277,472	\$424,145	\$701,617	40%
Child Care	\$225,654	\$69,800	\$295,454	76%
Civic (includes flood specific needs)	\$212,985	\$378,800	\$591,785	36%
Education	\$204,009	\$2,113,425	\$2,317,434	9%
Health & Medical;				
Mental Health	\$9,700	\$32,744	\$42,444	23%
Housing	\$396,162	\$304,000	\$700,162	57%
Human Services	\$309,730	\$2,648,361	\$2,958,091	10%
Legal	\$148,500	0	\$148,500	100%
Recreation	\$57,750	\$1,036,730	\$1,094,480	5%
Religious	\$263,400	\$2,013,275	\$2,276,675	12%
TOTALS	\$2,105,362	\$9,021,280	\$11,126,642	19%

In categories where total needs listed exceeded well beyond a million, organizations had listed extensive capital requests in both equipment and building replacement costs, that would not be covered by FEMA. While a small percentage of the needs were actually met for education, human services, and religious categories, the total amount raised for these categories as compared to others is comparable. Recreation, in which large capital expenses for parks were listed, had the smallest response in comparison to the amount requested or in relationship to the total raised. Certainly a number of large contributions were identified specifically for capital expenses, but it is probably unreasonable to expect a clearinghouse project of this nature could have met the significant long-term rebuilding needs listed by some groups. Below is a chart with the distribution of resources raised as compared to the total amount requested.

Category	% of Total Needs Met	% of Total Needs Requested
Arts	13%	6%
Child Care	11	3
Civic	10	5
Education	10	21
Health & Medical; Mental Health	0.5	0.4
Housing	19	6
Human Services	15	27
Legal	7	1
Recreation	3	10
Religious	13	20
	100%	100%

The “Bush-Bremer Partnership” accounts for a total of \$716,600 or 34 percent of needs met, according to the information provided through the website in July. With a total expenditure of \$150,000 for the Clearinghouse project, the administrative cost per dollar of income raised is seven cents including the Bush-Bremer grants or 11 cents without the partnership grants. Those figures can be compared to an analysis done by the United Way of America, which reports that member agencies raising between \$2 and \$4 million spend an average of 14.6 cents for every dollar raised.

Beyond cash contributions, some support came in the form of volunteer assistance and donated products, including items such as winter coats, childcare and school supplies, sheetrock, airfare to transport volunteers, and electronic equipment. A total of \$82,000 in donated materials was secured representing 35 separate matches. The total in-kind contributions from skilled and unskilled volunteers and donated airfare are \$70,000. Three groups totaling 54 persons were sent to Grand Forks and East Grand Forks between November 8 and December 6, 1997. A group of 10 went to Breckenridge, Minnesota in March 1998. The value of this support is included in the totals listed above.

The Clearinghouse staff exceeded its \$1 million goal by making matches meeting at least \$1.4 million, excluding the Partnership grants. In examining accomplishments by priority area, Stamstad provided in her report these results as described on the following page.

Emergency Needs/Social Services: Some 63 grants totaling \$1,189,811 were earmarked for emergency and social service needs, excluding child care. This figure represents nearly 57 percent of the total \$2.1 million. An additional four in-kind contributions valued at \$4,855 were also made.

Child Care: As of June 15, 1998, \$96,850 representing 11 grants were made to child care providers specifically for their capital and programmatic flood-

related needs. In addition, two in-kind contributions totaling \$2,200 were made.

Arts Organizations and Individual Artists: As of June 15, 58 grants totaling \$295,638 were made to flood-affected arts organizations in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks. Of the total, \$80,000 was raised following a May 7th Minneapolis rally to generate support.

Rural Needs: The St. Paul Foundation provided a grant of \$210,000 to address the needs of rural/farm families in Richland and Wilkin counties.

Faith Community: A total of \$278,400 from 13 sources had been raised for churches.

Education: A total of \$186,270 from 40 sources was raised for flood-related educational needs. In addition, \$49,700 was raised for a special effort for the Belmont Elementary School in Grand Forks, which lost its building to the flood and its temporary quarters to a fire on New Year's Eve, 1997. Funds for this special project came from 24 foundations and corporations and more than 100 individuals, including \$1,573 from over 75 individuals through efforts of a student at a middle school in Minneapolis.

The qualitative goals (or accomplishments) on the evolving list also were met or exceeded, as agreed by those interviewed and based on evidence found within the reports and documentation on the project. Other accomplishments, however, could be added to the list, as they were consistently identified by those interviewed.

Efficient Use of Time and Resources

The Clearinghouse managers understood as they communicated and worked with other agencies, unmet needs committees, and contributors, that the spirit of cooperation and exchange of information strengthened the recovery process. For some agencies working to identify and distribute resources, the Clearinghouse provided them an opportunity to either redirect attention to more pressing and neglected needs or allowed them to utilize their limited time in the most effective way.

Keep On-going Needs Alive

As public attention to the recovery process diminished, particularly in the Twin Cities and other areas removed from the disaster site, the Clearinghouse served as an important reminder that recovery continued and that assistance was still needed. Those who visited Grand Forks, some eight months to a year after the flood, had first-hand experience and quickly understood the magnitude of the disaster and subsequent recovery process. Many of these visitors either contributed or continued to contribute to the recovery efforts and, to some degree, spread the word of their experiences to others, sometimes resulting in additional contributions. This was certainly true of the assistance provided the flood-impacted arts organizations.

The Clearinghouse also provided a reminder to those recovering from the flood that they had not been forgotten. While not every group submitting an application was contacted by the Clearinghouse, a number did receive follow-up calls to check on their ongoing status. These calls were welcomed by those who received them and also contributed to the “mental boost” referred to by so many. The follow-up proved to be especially important to those who did not receive assistance through the Clearinghouse. Knowing that someone was paying attention gave people hope even if they were ultimately unsuccessful in receiving funding through the project.

Respond to New Programmatic Needs Emerging as Result of Disaster

Social service agencies, in particular, needed to not only rebuild their work environments and put programs back into place, but they also needed to address pressing concerns that emerged as a result of the flood. New challenges included bankruptcy, family violence, credit card debt, and increased mental health needs, to name a few. The flexibility of the Clearinghouse provided another means for these agencies to seek funds to increase staff and expand their programs. Because the Clearinghouse came after the initial influx of immediate assistance and because many of these challenges did not emerge until much later in the recovery process, the timing of the Clearinghouse proved to be critical for these agencies.

Provide a Sense of Fairness and Equity

Several individuals, including community leaders, contributors, and recipients, mentioned the importance of the Clearinghouse being located in a community foundation and away from Grand Forks. The very nature of a community foundation, according to those interviewed, is its sense of neutrality and opportunity for flexibility. The structure of the Clearinghouse as a place to exchange information matched that of a community foundation which receives funds from multiple sources and redistributes them in service to the community. That, combined with the geographic location of Fargo-Moorhead serving both states, created a sense of fairness and equity for the applicants and the contributors.

Further, the decision not to limit the types of needs listed or the kinds of organizations that could be included in the inventory also communicated a sense of fairness. And the equal attention paid to both applicants and contributors added to this democratic approach.

Meet a Broad Range of Needs

Within the focused approach of the Clearinghouse, a variety of needs was met, from capital support for equipment and rebuilding to assistance for rural families, general program support, and quality of life concerns. One contributor said, “The Clearinghouse dealt with quality of life issues that other efforts didn’t get down to. Those efforts took the big projects off the top and rightly so. They got the infrastructure back together. I was impressed by the range of things that was put together through the Clearinghouse.”

The YMCA installed a sprinkler system in order to reopen its facility to children and a Boy Scout troop took its annual camping trip. Arts organizations replaced lost equipment and instruments and received general operating support to help them through a period of reduced

activity and lost revenue. Churches received support to rebuild, and one individual contributed Christmas trees for families in Breckenridge and Ada. Schools were given gifts of computers, musical instruments, and educational materials. Individual artists were assisted along with home-based day care providers. Social service programs were supported, camping equipment replaced, food banks restocked, and a Christmas party was held for 28 relocated nursing home residents. From large to small needs, from meeting capital expenses to replenishing the human spirit and creating a sense of normality, the Clearinghouse met a broad range of needs.

Include a Range of Contributors

While the matchmaking component might have reached a broader range of contributors with a stronger communications plan, the mix of supporters is still impressive. The overwhelming total of dollar value support came from private and corporate foundations. However, contributions also were received from individuals, community organizations, and some businesses and corporations.

Individual contributions ranged from \$10 to \$10,000 and came from people with a broad range of interests including young people. One middle school student in the Twin Cities raised over \$1,500 from her classmates and their parents. And the students of Greybull Elementary School in Wyoming sent their pencil fund of \$200 and raised additional support in the form of teacher supplies and winter coats to help the Belmont Elementary School, that had lost its temporary school to a winter fire.

Community organizations included the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions clubs, the James Sewell Ballet, the Junior League of Fargo, the Do-It-Yourself Homemakers, and a sorority, among others. The Walker Art Center raised more than \$8,000 from its staff and board. Twin Cities arts organizations distributed flyers in their programs about a challenge grant from the Sewell Family Foundation for arts organizations in Grand Forks. Nonprofit executives provided technical assistance. And more than 60 skilled and unskilled volunteers traveled to the disaster site to help rebuild homes.

* * *

The Clearinghouse proved to be an extremely cost efficient program that added another dimension of flood recovery activity, contributing to the total support instead of duplicating efforts. While larger sums of financial aid helped organizations rebuild physical structures and put programs back into place, every expression of support motivated people and kept their spirits lifted.

VI. Lessons Learned

“It takes someone who knows the community and resources well to make this kind of thing happen.” A Recipient

While similar cooperative efforts have been made in other communities experiencing a major natural disaster, the 1997 Flood Clearinghouse, as it was conceived and executed, was unusual. Its success, due to the efficient and effective system put in place, should be shared with other communities and regions of the country surviving the effects of a major disaster. The sense of passion and humanity with which it was executed serves as inspiration and a reminder that well designed systems are most effective when driven by the heart.

A step-by-step blueprint for establishing a clearinghouse of this type might seem desirable and the most efficient way to share this experience with other communities. However the uniqueness of both the Upper Midwest and the magnitude of this disaster make it difficult to clearly point the way for the establishment of this project in another community. The Minnesota system for grant making and philanthropy, in particular, is extremely well organized and extensive. There is a long history of support in this region resulting in an understandable and accessible system that does not necessarily exist in other parts of the country. Further, the impact of this 500-year flood was massive effecting not only people’s homes, but their work places, their religious institutions, their schools, their centers for recreation, their places for healing. Every aspect of life for nearly every individual living and working in the Grand Forks area was affected. Disasters of this size are rare, and the clearinghouse was created against this backdrop. While the basic ingredients of the needs assessment can most easily be duplicated, the matchmaking component will change depending on the support system in place and the size of the disaster and resulting needs. Further, the home for a clearinghouse will depend on the larger community’s resources. While a community foundation proved to be an ideal location for the Flood Clearinghouse, in another community other resources may be more appropriate.

As a way of providing guidance to another community in the event of a disaster and of understanding the key lessons learned from this experience, a list of 13 points have been identified, based on the accomplishments of the Flood Clearinghouse and the strengths and weaknesses described in this report.

Establish a Neutral System; Keep Program Fair and Equitable

The sense of neutrality that was important to the Flood Clearinghouse was maintained by a number of critical decisions made early in the process. The very nature of the Clearinghouse as a place to gather and exchange information, rather than make funding decisions, set the groundwork for those decisions. The policy not to limit the types of organizations that could apply or the kinds of needs they could list contributed significantly to a sense of fairness. In reviewing the inventory of needs that were not met, that policy was not abused. The location of the Clearinghouse in a community foundation that geographically represented the areas experiencing damage helped to establish neutral grounds.

Human Interaction is Critical

For both the potential recipient and the contributor, the opportunity to interact with one another and with the program staff was not only critical to the financial success of the project, but benefited the participants by providing motivation and spiritual uplifting. While the primary purpose of the Clearinghouse was to establish a single, central place to collect and disseminate information about needs, the ability to interact on a personal level created a sense of *understanding*. The people leading the organizations in need received the extra benefit of knowing they could talk to someone who would listen and understand their plight. By sharing those experiences, either directly or through the Clearinghouse coordinators, potential contributors had a better understanding of the long term impact of the disaster and all the ways it effected *people* - not just faceless organizations. This understanding, in turn, spawned gifts of money, time, and materials. And the first-hand experiences of those contributors who actually visited the disaster site and met or worked with the people there created a deeper level of understanding that turned into passion.

Because of the importance of employing a caring personal approach, the right number and the right types of individuals are needed in staffing a clearinghouse. In selecting the key personnel for a project of this type, people who have the ability to listen and to share their passion for the organizations and understanding of their needs will make strong candidates.

Define the Length of the Project and Allow Timing to Complement Other Efforts

The length of the entire project, excluding the research and development phase, will vary depending on the situation. Based on the information collected through the interviews, a full year may have been most appropriate for this project considering the magnitude of the disaster. A second and third wave of needs adjustments occurred at about the six-month mark at a time when other organizations were just beginning to understand their needs for the first time. Providing those groups with another two or three months to make changes probably would have been helpful. While the deadline to add or adjust needs could have ended short of a full year, an additional two or three months to complete the matchmaking phase probably would have resulted in enough additional contributions to justify the resources and time.

In most other circumstances, anything less than a year would appear to be an appropriate length of time based on this experience. In the end, however, the resources available to manage the clearinghouse, the amount of damage and the number of organizations involved, and the total available potential sources of support should all be considered when defining the length of the project.

Timing, when the project begins, is also an important consideration. While it may seem obvious that “the sooner the better” is the best advice, in the experience of the Flood Clearinghouse, some distance from the actual disaster proved to be effective and useful for two major reasons. Time allowed for research and planning contributed to the effectiveness of the project. The process of involving key decision makers, both community leaders and potential funders, in the design of the project created an opportunity for all participants to contribute to its success, both at the beginning and throughout.

Secondly, many of the applicants felt that it was important that the Clearinghouse became available soon after the initial rush of support and attention. Timing the project so that it begins during the period when discouragement sets in, or “after the hot dishes stop coming,” proved to be invaluable in helping to keep people motivated and their spirits up.

Role of a Short-term Clearinghouse Needs to be Focused and Clearly Defined

An initial period of research to identify the gaps in support will help in defining the role of a clearinghouse. Its goals and means of reaching them should *complement* the efforts of others rather than duplicate them. A short-term project of this kind can not be comprehensive in who it reaches and what it accomplishes and remain effective.

Further, due to the short time frame, clearinghouse activity and the jobs of the personnel need to be clearly focused. Time should be spent on the areas that prove to be the most productive, and activity in areas that seem to be time consuming and unproductive should be quickly analyzed and dropped, if solutions can be not be readily identified.

Staffing Needs Will Fluctuate and More Matchmaking Time Will Generate Broader Support

Additional staff time may be needed at the beginning of the needs assessment when a significant volume of information is entered into the website and when the first initial wave of inquiries occurs. A second part-time matchmaker probably would be helpful soon after the initial needs assessment is completed and analyzed, depending on the system of community support and the types of individuals contacted. However, two matchmakers is likely not necessary for the entire period.

A communications consultant also would be a valuable addition to any similar project. The effects of a strong communications program could pay for itself many times over, keeping the overall expenses low as compared to the results. This consultant should be included early in the planning phase and retained at least throughout the first major phase of needs assessment and matchmaking. It is possible that a communications consultant could take on the role of a second matchmaker, focusing on grassroots efforts and targeted appeals to community groups and small businesses.

Initial Research and Involvement of Key Leaders and Funders Will Set the Stage for Success

“It takes time to build consensus and get people to buy into the idea,” said one foundation executive. The initial period of development, involving both key community leaders and funders, was important in cultivating interest and involvement in the project, this individual said. Another discussed the value of contacting people in other communities who had experienced a disaster, learning the most and least effective ways they approached the recovery period.

Website is an Information Management Tool and Not a Substitute for Matchmaking

The website proved to be a valuable tool for providing basic information to both applicants and contributors and useful in managing the status of needs and matches. However, it is not a

substitute for matchmaking in most cases. While some matches may have occurred as the primary result of the website, there were probably fewer than was originally anticipated.

Consider Location as Part of the Strategy for Achieving Goals

The location of the Clearinghouse may be an important part of the strategy for achieving the goals of a clearinghouse. For the Flood Clearinghouse, the Fargo-Moorhead location provided a sense of neutrality both due to its geographic location and its placement in a community foundation. Keeping the program accessible is useful for improved communications, but providing some distance from the politics of recovery will help in maintaining a sense of fairness and equity.

Flexibility is Necessary

One must be able to shift gears and to remain open to new ideas, especially in the process of rebuilding an entire community. Remaining flexible proved to be invaluable to the recipients, especially as needs began to change and increase.

Keep Everything Simple

In a project that lasts a year or less, not only should the focus be narrow and on the strengths of the project's resources, but everything must be kept simple. In the middle of a disaster, people do not have time to complete complicated forms. The short two-page inventory form was considered extremely important to the project's success according to those included in the needs assessment. The ability to contact one organization as a means of reaching many potential contributors also helped to keep the process of seeking funds simple for those who needed to concentrate on recovery efforts.

Multiple Avenues of Communication are Needed in Needs Inventory and Matchmaking

In order to reach as many people as possible, either in a needs assessment or matchmaking phase, multiple avenues of communication will help reach as many people and organizations as possible, while at the same time provide constant reminders.

Avoid Establishing an Advisory Committee

Early in the planning of the Clearinghouse, an advisory committee was considered to assist in making decisions. That idea was abandoned, which proved to be a wise decision. As a facilitator, the project served as a *resource* to the organizations needing assistance and the contributors. Decisions about contributions were ultimately in the hands of the individual donors.

Avoid Creating Central Pool of Funds

One of the key decisions made was to avoid the creation of a central pool of funds. Again, by serving as a place to exchange information and nurture understanding, the Clearinghouse could maintain that important neutrality and keep the process as uncomplicated as possible.

* * *

There is no question but that the monetary and material support provided the people and organizations in the flood impacted regions of Minnesota and North Dakota were needed, welcomed, and appreciated. The people providing that support were moved by the stories of recovery and the sense of passion shared by those who had had direct experiences visiting the people and places in the Grand Forks area. Gathering information and distributing it in an efficient manner provided the skeletal framework, but it was the human interaction that led to compassion and understanding, motivating people to provide support in a myriad of ways.

With this report, we hope the experiences of the '97 Flood Clearinghouse and the lessons learned will be of value to those who face the challenges left behind by nature's fury in rebuilding their community, both its spirit and its sense of place.