

Hail the Unsung

THREE YEARS PRIOR

Heroes of Hurricane Harvey

By Sharon Danosky

I am frustrated by the lack of understanding that undermines the efforts of many dedicated staff and volunteers in the nonprofit sector.

What prompts my writing are reports from several news sources that do not understand what it takes to build a relief infrastructure. A non-profit executive was stating that they would be providing a full accounting next week of the funds that had been raised and spent in the relief effort for Hurricane Harvey. The reporter then asked, with a note of incredulity in her voice – “wouldn’t that be the same?” Implicit in her question was an assumption that if the funds spent were not the same as the funds raised, there must be some mismanagement or worse.



Nonprofit organizations do not exist in a world that is so black and white. Simply because you have raised the funds, ordered the supplies, set up a supply chain, provided the cots, food, water, blankets, and distributed donated goods, does not mean that every bill is paid simultaneously. Nor does it account for staff time, travel, reimbursement for gasoline, etc. The sheer logistics, coordination and manpower hours (both donated and paid) are staggering. Nonprofits are the first on the ground and many arrive at great peril and no one is punching a clock. But it does cost money and it is not a matter of simple bookkeeping. Vendors do not submit bills instantaneously and staff isn’t paid every hour, so the funds raised and spent would never be the same for any organization on a week to week basis. Why would it be so expected simply because it is a nonprofit organization?

Nor did this same reporter take into consideration what many on the ground have been saying consistently: this recovery will not be complete within days, weeks or months. It will take years. And the recovery efforts will also be funded and supported by many non-profits. Good stewardship of the funds raised includes insuring that they are being managed today and tomorrow. Whether there will be support to provide for the myriad expenditures to come is precarious. That is why investment in ongoing fundraising is critical to ensuring that continued resources are available. However, fundraising costs are frequently viewed as a negative without any recognition of the effort it takes to continue bringing the challenges of recovery to the public – long after the reporters have left.

We have been living in a world where every fundraising scam is given an inordinate amount of publicity – in some instances where it wasn't warranted. In reality, nonprofit organizations do a remarkable job with limited resources. They are a critical part of the relief and recovery equation, often providing relief and support that federal and state governments are either unable or unwilling to provide.

What I do applaud is another reporter who was discussing a number of alternatives where people could contribute. He was asked why not focus on international organizations such as Red Cross or Americares? His response was that most people are aware of those organizations – and they do extraordinary work. However, the local charities are there today and will remain boots on the ground tomorrow – because this is their community and this is the work they do.

It is appropriate that we recognize the men and women, who are both paid and volunteer for the incredible work they do. We should also recognize those who raise and manage the funds. There is a cost to providing relief and recovery efforts.

Beyond the pictures of dramatic rescues and volunteers serving food – there is a nonprofit infrastructure that makes it function – and that, too is worthy of our support and recognition.