



# MINNESOTA HELPS FUND - BRIDGE DISASTER FUND™

## REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

SEPTEMBER 2009



The Minnesota Helps – Bridge Disaster Fund™ collected contributions totaling \$1,268,369 from individuals, businesses, foundations, and hundreds of other organizations across the state and around the country who were moved to act in the wake of the bridge disaster. One hundred percent of the funds collected were distributed to aid survivors of the I-35W bridge collapse, as well as those who lost loved ones in the disaster.

## How the Fund was Created

On August 2, 2007, the day after the collapse, Minneapolis Foundation staff anticipated that we would need to create a special fund – at least for our donors – to collect contributions to provide aid to the survivors and to the families of the 13 individuals who died. This was confirmed when Minneapolis Mayor RT Rybak contacted The Minneapolis Foundation and requested we take the lead on setting up a fund that would provide an efficient way to pool contributions from the public.

The Minnesota Helps Fund was created on August 3rd and a website was developed to provide information on how to contribute and to accept credit card donations. (It was modeled after a fund we created after Hurricane Katrina, although those contributions were distributed through organizations in the affected region.) Our accounting department set up procedures and staff assignments to handle the anticipated donations. A press release was issued, and Mayor Rybak announced the Fund at a Twins game that weekend.

At the same time, we contacted other major foundations to provide seed money to start the Fund. A total of \$225,000 was contributed by The Minneapolis Foundation, The Saint Paul Foundation, Minnesota Community Foundation, Greater Twin Cities United Way, McKnight Foundation, Northwest Area Foundation, and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation. In the following months, many other organizations hosted events with proceeds benefitting the Minnesota Helps Fund.

We took care to establish protections and procedures to ensure that funds contributed by the public would be distributed exactly as intended. We sought to avoid the mistakes made by other disaster funds, and wanted to ensure transparency and accountability. This included protecting the Fund and the name from fraud. We worked with Faegre and Benson to trademark the name and variations, for all uses, including the website.

## A Huge Volume of Contributions

Although we knew there was high interest on the part of the public, none of us anticipated the volume of contributions, or how immediate the response would be. By Monday, August 6, the Fund had already received on-line contributions, and on Tuesday the checks started arriving in the mail. Contributions

ranged from less than \$5 to \$100,000, and came from foundations, corporations and their employees, faith groups, community organizations, fundraisers, and thousands of individuals from Minnesota and around the nation. More than 400 online donations were made, totaling \$45,000 or 4% of the total. The remainder came in by check.

## The Distribution of Funds

Distributions from Minnesota Helps Fund were made as grants to agencies that provided services to the survivors or paid bills on their behalf.

- 100% of the money donated was distributed to aid survivors and the families of the deceased. With the addition of interest income earned, a total of \$1,287,933 was distributed to aid survivors.
- Approximately 20% of the contributions were distributed as grants to agencies that provided a variety of services, such as group counseling and activities for the children on the school bus, trauma and grief support groups, and helping families with translation services.
- Over 80% of the contributions were distributed to pay for medical bills, living expenses, transportation costs, medical equipment, physical therapy, and other expenses on direct behalf of 110 individuals or families.

## Establishing the Grantmaking Process

We were asked by our partners to take the lead in grantmaking and distributions from the Fund to ensure they conformed to best practices. Staff from The Minneapolis Foundation, worked with our foundation partners to create a procedure for distributing grants to agencies that provided group services to survivors.

The first grants went to agencies providing a range of services including grief and trauma counseling, services and help for the kids on the Waite House school bus (see above), and even some burial expenses.

More challenging was creating the process through which aid could be given to meet individual needs. The Minneapolis Foundation staff met with staff from the Mayor's office and other agencies and responders. As a result, a Long Term Recovery Committee was formed to coordinate case-by-case assistance to

Fifty-two children were aboard a bus heading to their after school program at Waite House when the bridge fell. Waite House provided a range of services to help the children and their families with funding from the Fund. *At right, Waite House kids used art to heal, by creating a mural depicting their experience.*

The children participated in Waite House summer programs, assisted by staff who were trained to identify and help kids manage trauma-related symptoms.

Waite House staff also helped the children overcome the anxiety they understandably experienced with respect to riding buses – a component of most summer and academic programs.



individuals and families. Again, this was modeled after a similar effort to help families affected by Katrina who were relocating to the Twin Cities.

### Coordinating and Providing Support to Survivors

A Long Term Recovery Committee (LTRC) is a standard structure created in the aftermath of a disaster to coordinate community resources to help survivors reach a point of stability. It provides a means to distribute private contributions to cover immediate expenses not covered by insurance or other resources, but does not provide for long-term disability or lost wages.

The LTRC established after the bridge disaster included representatives from the **Red Cross, Salvation Army, Hennepin County, Greater Twin Cities United Way, Pillsbury United Waite House, and Catholic Charities.**

United Way 2-1-1™ did extensive outreach to contact the survivors and the families of those who were affected by the bridge collapse. Survivors seeking assistance were assigned a resource coordinator from one of these LTRC agencies through United Way 2-1-1™. The resource coordinator helped assess their needs, connected them to resources, and applied for financial assistance. The LTRC met weekly to review assessments and financial requests, and then recommended that grants be given to the agencies, which paid bills on behalf of the individual or family.

This emergency response effort and the role of the LTRC is a model now being used by other communities to respond to disasters. This was a historic collaborative effort of many philanthropic, nonprofit entities, and county, state, and local government agencies. The foundations who seeded the Minnesota Helps fund, created the fund distribution process. The LTRC agencies coordinated services and helped apply for aid on behalf of the individuals and families affected by the bridge collapse. And many nonprofit and government agencies provided services directly to the victims, survivors, and their families.

### Media Coverage and Public Interest

Both local and national media covered the Minnesota Helps Fund as part of their coverage of the bridge disaster.

Local media tracked donations and fundraisers daily. They also raised questions about when and how contributions would

be distributed and what those contributions could – and couldn't – cover. Many of these questions were fueled by general frustration about how survivors would be compensated over the long term, and who was to blame for the collapse. Some survivors also publicly expressed frustration with the process.

Since the Minnesota Helps Fund was created in real time, there were delays while new processes were established to ensure the funds would be used most effectively. In addition, the LTRC had the challenge of tracking down survivors and victims' families – some of whom, understandably, were either overwhelmed by their circumstances or were focused on moving forward with their lives and were not receptive to outreach efforts or support.

In time, as the Minnesota Helps Fund was spent down, these issues dissipated. The Charities Review Council also monitored our fundraising and fund distribution efforts to assure the public that we were being as transparent as possible.

### How Donations Were Used to Help Survivors

In partnership with the LTRC, the Minnesota Helps Fund distributed grants to assist survivors and their families with expenses such as:

- Daily Living - Mortgage/rent, food, utilities, basic needs
- Transportation - Car repair/replacement/rental, bus fare
- Medical Expenses - Other costs not covered by insurance
- Miscellaneous - Childcare, phone, loan payments

Among the many ways in which the community's generous support helped survivors and victims:

- The family of an individual whose life was lost in the bridge collapse received help with living expenses.
- A survivor received help with expenses while in the hospital, as well as physical and occupational therapy, specialized medical equipment, and adaptive home renovation.
- A local employment assistance provider requested assistance for a survivor who was unable to work for several weeks due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- A survivor whose car was left on the bridge, requested help with transportation for the family.

## MINNESOTA HELPS FUND

### At a Glance

Donations: \$1,268,369.20

Distributions: \$1,287,933.83\*

Over 50 philanthropic, nonprofit, and government agencies provided services on behalf of the victims, survivors, and their families.

\*Distributions include 100% of the dollars donated, plus interest income earned on the fund which was also distributed on behalf of the survivors.

Of the families affected by the disaster:

- American Red Cross assisted 47 families
- Catholic Charities assisted 18 families
- The Salvation Army assisted 26 families
- Waite House/Pillsbury United assisted 19 families
- 36 families did not request assistance through this process

### *From the survivors*

- I was very thankful that the Minnesota Helps Fund was available. It was very confusing initially to get help. I was impressed with all the folks involved during the process. It was a fast and confusing time in our lives and you all helped us through it.
- My coordinators were incredible...made my family feel comfortable with the process and helped me to understand that it was ok to accept this help.
- Even though we did not use the fund, it was always nice to hear from the United Way. [the lead coordinating partner in the Long Term Recovery Committee connecting survivors with services and aid]. We have struggled this past year with physical and emotional trauma. Just knowing the United Way was a phone call away was helpful.

### *From the contributors*

- We are sorry for the people who died...the people who got hurt and injured...and we are giving the people money to help. [donors, age 6 and 8]
- My heart goes out to the families and loved ones touched by the collapse of 35W. Although I no longer live in Minnesota, I am a Minnesotan through and through, and my heart aches for my fellow Minnesotans.
- I send sincere condolences for those lost and injured, great admiration for your first responders and citizens who acted bravely and kindly, and best wishes for your recovery.
- Thank you for this opportunity to help in a small way.
- Thank you for setting up this fund, for donating 100% of these proceeds to those who need it most, and for all the work you have done to make this possible!!



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