

## JFNA's Emergency Response and Overview of Priority/Policy Issues

The past five weeks since the start of Hurricane Harvey have seen the biggest succession of massive natural disasters to hit North America. JFNA's Emergency Committee process has been stretched beyond capacity by the number of events and locales requiring urgent attention. Several JFNA staff (Mark Gurvis, EVP; Steve Woolf and Karen Yoskowitz, members of our DC team who staff the Emergency Committee, and Ed Finkel, a Network staff member who works with the small communities that have been affected) and professionals from the directly affected communities have been engaged in these issues non-stop for several weeks.

### Overview of Various Disaster Episodes

**Hurricane Harvey** – The devastation across the Houston region generally and in the Jewish community is on the scale of Katrina in New Orleans. With an estimated 2,000 homes flooded and seven major community facilities severely damaged the short, near and long term needs for the Jewish community are now estimated in excess of \$30M. In addition, the small neighboring communities of Galveston and Beaumont/Port Arthur have a number of Jewish families with severely flooded homes.

The Federation system has raised about \$15.5M. More than half of this figure has been raised by the Houston Federation. It is likely that this number is based on under-reported fundraising results at the community level and we also anticipate several additional significant foundation grants will be approved in the next week. But these other resources are not likely to amount to more than \$2-3M, leaving Houston they need, at least at this point.

**Hurricane Irma** – In most of Florida and the neighboring states to the north Hurricane Irma had varying degrees of impact. For the most part, the areas with the largest Jewish populations on the east coast were spared significant damage. The most severe damage to homes and communal institutions are in Naples, Jacksonville and St. Augustine. In addition there are smaller communities up through Georgia that are reporting the need for some assistance for families and infrastructure.

The long power outages in the week following the storm created a significant short-term health issue, especially for seniors, and several Federations and Chabad engaged in extensive outreach, visiting, and food and water delivery efforts. The JFNA Emergency Committee provided emergency grants to a several local Federations last week. Other Federations took emergency response actions and the JFNA Emergency Committee will consider further grants to support these efforts as needed. JFNA is still assessing longer-range needs across the broad number of communities hit by Irma.

The truly severe impact from Irma has been in the Florida Keys and US Virgin Islands (St. Thomas) where enormous damage to power grids, airports, shipping ports, water supplies, medical systems and more have brought daily life to a standstill. In addition, many homes were damaged; some completely ruined.

Many people have been evacuated from both locales but there are small numbers of Jews who will not leave because they are involved professionally in government, medicine or other critical fields. The lack of communal infrastructure beyond the individual synagogue level provides additional challenges for JFNA and our Federations. JFNA is in active contact with and supporting the synagogue communities in both areas.

**Hurricane Maria** – Maria had a crushing impact on several island nations and in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican community is about 1,500 people. It has two synagogues and a Chabad presence. The entire power grid for the island may be out for 4-6 months and the challenges ahead for the Jewish community there and for the general population are enormous. JFNA is working actively with local leadership in Puerto Rico to bring assistance to the island as quickly as possible. IsraAid also now has a team operating in Puerto Rico working directly with the Jewish community.

-----

Only about \$330,000 has been raised and committed to JFNA to respond specifically to Hurricane Irma and/or to additional hurricanes in 2017. This figure is probably significantly understated as there has simply been no time to check individually with Federations on what they have raised or granted. Nonetheless, it is likely that our system has raised no more than \$1-2M total for hurricane related needs beyond Harvey.

JDC has been coordinating emergency responses in several island nations outside the US that have been affected (Cuba, British Virgin Islands, etc...), and IsraAid has deployed in a few islands to provide emergency response services.

**Mexico Earthquakes** – Following the first earthquake a few weeks ago JDC made the decision to hold off engaging and opening an emergency fund as the impact was not in a region where they had contacts and relationships, and there did not appear to be an impact on the local Jewish community. Once the second earthquake hit Mexico City last week the JDC moved quickly to establish a partnership on the ground with Cadena Mexico, a major Mexican-based relief organization. In addition, the Israeli government and IsraAid both deployed search and rescue teams to Mexico City. A third major earthquake has since hit but it does not appear to have produced wide-scale additional needs.

**Emergency Committee and Staff Actions to Date**

1. The Emergency Committee has met numerous times since the onset of Hurricane Harvey, approving initial funding grants totaling \$2.2M in response to Harvey, Irma and Maria:
  - \$1.75M to the Houston Federation providing for emergency cash assistance, short-term relocation costs for schools displaced by flooding, educational scholarships, replacement of equipment for the JCC seniors program, costs to ensure High Holiday services for flooded congregations, capitalization of a new flood related free loan program and as an initial emergency grant for the Federation to deploy as needed. [Note: These funds are in addition to \$2M in restricted funds allocated to day school scholarships and capital repair needs. Because our committee is acting in response to the Houston Federation’s requests for

reimbursement, significant additional funds are in process being deployed but have not yet been formally approved.]

- \$100,000 to the Beaumont/Port Arthur and Galveston, TX communities to be administered through the local congregations and/or Houston JFS.
  - \$50,000 to Nechama for their emergency response efforts in Houston and the surrounding region.
  - \$40,000 to Florida Federations for food relief and cash assistance needs following Hurricane Irma.
  - \$50,000 to the Hebrew Congregation in St. Thomas (USVI) for urgent cash assistance needs in the community.
  - \$75,000 to the Puerto Rico congregations for urgent cash assistance needs in their communities.
  - \$80,000 to IsraAid to support their deployment in Puerto Rico providing emergency assistance and trauma counseling.
  - \$50,000 to the Afya Foundation to support the shipping to two containers of medical and construction supplies to Puerto Rico.
  - \$1,000 to Temple Beth Tefilloh (Brunswick, GA) to support urgent cash assistance needs in this Network community.
2. JFNA deployed three teams of JFNA and Federation professionals to Houston over three weeks to provide direct assistance to the Federation and community in mobilizing its first stage response to the flooding. In addition, JFNA worked with the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies to mobilize similar teams of JFS professionals to support the local Houston JFS for several weeks with additional staff resources.
  3. In addition, as reports from the island communities identified a critical need for generators, JFNA was about to source 200 generators in Florida at cost through Federation connections. UJA Federation of New York provided funding \$142,000 for the purchase and JFNA is coordinating the shipments as soon as logistically possible.

### **Policy and Priority Issues to Consider**

The multiplicity of events has quickly brought to the fore a range of significant policy and priority issues for JFNA and the Federations to consider:

1. **Clarity of Funding Resources Contributed** – Up to the point of impact of Hurricane Irma it is reasonably clear that any funds contributed were motivated by the impact of Hurricane Harvey and should be targeted to relief efforts in Houston and nearby. However, we have incomplete reports from communities about how much has been granted or raised locally and in what time frames, and once Irma hit some fundraising efforts blended. Segregating out what funds were contributed specifically to address the very large scale needs in Houston with the subsequent

national disasters will be challenging, and will take significant staff time to check community by community to ensure that we know:

- a. How much funding are communities holding from grants and donations.
  - b. How much they intend to forward to the national funding pools – (some communities will want to retain some portion of their funding to manage their own decision making process about what to fund, or to sustain relationships with longstanding partners in the relief field (i.e. IsraAid, Nechama, ITC, Afya Foundation, others), or to use a portion of their funding to send volunteer groups to affected regions.
  - c. How much may be restricted to responses to specific storms.
2. **Funding Priorities for the National Response** – Historically the funding approved by the JFNA Emergency Committee has been focused first and foremost to address the needs of individuals and families, and secondarily and depending on available resources, to assist communal organizations. With the concentrated impact on Houston’s Jewish communal infrastructure it can be hard to discern the line between these categories. When families can no longer afford fees for Jewish educational programs, or to belong to synagogues and JCCs, the collective impact can quickly escalate to a serious sustainability risk to the institution, and the potential loss of institutions across the community could, in turn, result in the large scale collapse of Jewish communal life that affects both individuals/families and the community as a whole.
3. **Priorities Among Stages of Response** – Historically the JFNA Emergency Committee has focused on the immediate term issues, supporting the rescue and relief efforts of partners such as Nechama and IsraAid, and on the longer term issues of helping families cope with trauma and address financial issues through assistance and scholarship grants. The mid-term issues facing communities can be challenging for us to meaningfully address as our processes often work best either with quick, in the moment emergency responses, or longer-range, more thoughtful considerations that take time.
4. **Sourcing Emergency Funding** – JFNA’s Emergency Fund is a non-replenishing fund. Although the Emergency Committee has a modest reserve fund the Committee leadership has had a growing concern about the increasing pace of significant storm impacts on various communities, and how far the committee should go in depleting the Fund to respond as needed in those situations where a national fundraising response fails to meet the scope of needs. Recent examples include the previous floods in Houston, storm damage in Baton Rouge, and flooding in the Detroit Jewish community. Recent experience points to our being in a period of increasing natural disasters affecting many areas where Jews have been and will be affected going forward. Looking ahead, what should the role of the Federations be in responding to such needs, locally and nationally?

5. **Balancing our Response to Distinctively Jewish Needs with the Wider Massive Needs** – The basis of our work in this area has always been *“kol yisrael arevim ze’baze”* - all Israel is responsible for one another. At the same time, we have historically sought to balance this driving value base with another Jewish value – *“Im ayn ani li, mi li”* – if I am only for myself, who am I? In the wake of Hurricane Katrina our system raised over \$30M and approximately a quarter of the funds were granted to general community agencies serving a broader population. From the start of Hurricane Harvey the response in Houston has consciously balanced a distinctive approach to the needs of the Jewish community while being inclusive at multiple levels in response to the need and desire, articulated among our Federations and by the Houston leadership – to be part of the response to the broader need. In locales like St. Thomas, Puerto Rico and the Keys, it would be callous at best to devote resources to only the very small Jewish populations that are surrounded by massive critical needs.
  
6. **Symmetry between Domestic and International Emergencies** – With the increasing occurrence of emergencies of various kinds, is it necessary or desirable to develop a relationship or parallel approach to how we address them in both the domestic and international arenas. For example, in working with the Houston Federation on developing categories of community members whose homes flooded who would receive emergency cash assistance grants of \$1,000, we were able to help local leadership understand our history of support at a similar levels through the Jewish Agency for their Fund for Victims of Terror, or for those who lost homes during recent wildfires in Israel.

There is no question that the multiplicity of events is taxing both JFNA staff resources as well as our system’s financial capacity to respond at a meaningful scale. Even as we work together to address the many urgent needs at hand, the Jewish Federations will need a framework for discussing the broader priority and policy issues enumerated above.