

**AN EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY-WIDE FLOOD RELIEF EFFORTS**  
**2004-2005**  
**A Study Commissioned by North Hills Community Outreach**

**SUBMITTED—July 2006**

Cornerstone Evaluation Associates LLC would like to express appreciation to all flood victims who made this evaluation possible by willingly sharing their time and their stories as well as to those volunteers who gave tireless hours to gather critical information from these individuals.

In addition, Cornerstone would like to thank NHCO staff members as well as its own associates for exceptionally good work in completing this project. They are in alphabetical order: at NHCO—Mary Renee Chi, Director of Services; Virginia Giles, Volunteer Team Leader; Wendy Gordon, Director of Communications; Fay Morgan, Executive Director and David Tiernan, Flood Service Manager.

At Cornerstone—Robert Goldbach for his assistance with data analysis, Claire Palmgren for her role in overseeing interviewing, Marilyn Spisak for her work throughout this evaluation and Gabe Yu for his assistance with transcriptions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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I did truly, thoroughly enjoy working with NHCO. You know, my contacts with them were always professional. They never stepped over their bounds and they were always very respectful of the Privacy Act...It has always been a good relationship and I appreciate that very much—*Administrator from partnering agency*

### Introduction

North Hills Community Outreach (NHCO) is a 501(c)(3) organization that is both faith- and community-based. Founded in 1987 as an agency of 'People Helping People,' NHCO began as a by-product of community-wide assistance to victims of the 1986 flood. NHCO has grown steadily since establishing its main office in Allison Park, PA, opening satellites in Millvale in 1993 and Bellevue in 1997.

NHCO addresses the basic human needs of local individuals and families in poverty and hardship by providing assistance developed in response to their needs. Among the wide-range of services that NHCO has provided to the community is flood relief and recovery.

Consequently, in the first few days immediately following Hurricane Ivan in September 2004, NHCO received almost 500 requests for help, primarily from families in Northern Allegheny County in communities such as Etna, Millvale, Sharpsburg, Shaler, Hampton, Aspinwall, Avalon and Emsworth. This figure had climbed to over 1,000 households and over 40 businesses within a few months. Most of the calls for help concerned individuals' needs for food, furnaces, water heaters, refrigerators, washers and dryers as well as their need to relocate. Individuals in Etna and Millvale appeared to have sustained the most damaging flooding.

At the time, NHCO had 24 staff members and more than 1,000 volunteers. The organization was already skilled at addressing basic human needs so that 'no one in northern Allegheny County is cold, hungry or forgotten.' Thus, NHCO was positioned to serve as the leader for grassroots flood relief efforts.

Drawing on a long history of service in the affected communities, NHCO developed a realistic plan and budget to efficiently meet the pressing needs of flood victims. As part of this plan, NHCO added six full-time staff members led by a flood relief manager, all of whom were dedicated to the flood relief efforts. The addition of the specialized flood staff was imperative so that 'regular' staff could continue helping those in crises and hardship not related to the flood.

NHCO named a staff liaison to each affected community. These liaisons were charged with staying in contact with critical community leaders such as mayors and managers. In addition, NHCO played a pivotal role in forming collaborative partnerships with other agencies that were participating in the flood relief and recovery efforts. These coalition/partnering organizations included...

- Adventist Community Services
- Allegheny County Department of Human Services
- Business Organization of Millvale
- Etna Team for Neighborhood Assistance—ETNA
- FEMA—PA Emergency Management Association
- Hosanna Industries
- Millvale Assistance Team—MAT
- Network of Hope

- PA Christian Endeavor\*
- Pittsburgh Habitat for Humanity
- Southwestern PA Long Term Recovery Team
- St. Vincent De Paul

\*A group from eastern PA brought to Pittsburgh through the efforts and coordination of NHCO.

In addition to its partnerships, NHCO relied heavily on its general volunteer pool comprised of professionals such as carpenters, plumbers, architects, social workers, attorneys and others donating their time and talent.

NHCO received more than \$1.5 million in financial and in-kind donations from thousands of donors, including individuals, schools, businesses, congregations, civic groups and foundations. These resources were marshaled to provide assistance during the initial rescue efforts and subsequent relief and recovery efforts. In fact, NHCO and its partnering agencies continue to address the relief and recovery needs of Hurricane Ivan flood victims to this day.

### **Research Approach**

As the lead agency among organizations providing services to flood victims, NHCO commissioned Cornerstone Evaluation Associates LLC to conduct an evaluation of the overall, community-wide flood relief efforts. NHCO wanted to understand how the services provided by all the partnering agencies impacted the flood victims who received assistance. More specifically, NHCO wanted...

- to examine the extent to which flood victims—both householders and businesses—were satisfied with the services they received
- to understand which services victims perceived as most and least adequate
- to identify what concerns victims still have that remain unresolved
- to know how their partners perceived NHCO—what these partnering agencies thought of NHCO's leadership ability, its effectiveness, efficiency and professionalism and how satisfied these partners were with the assistance and support they received from NHCO

It is anticipated that by taking an 'introspective' look at the outcomes of their efforts, NHCO and its partnering agencies will be better positioned in the event of another flooding or similar disaster to provide critically-needed emergency services. In addition, the information will allow NHCO more knowledge in stepping forward as a leader to assist partnering service agencies. Feedback about overall direct services and NHCO's leadership abilities can also be shared with funders to demonstrate the achievement, capacity and effectiveness of NHCO and its partnering agencies in handling this and other disasters of this magnitude.

To answer critical questions about the adequacy of flood relief services, Cornerstone, a Pittsburgh-based, client-centered research firm, proposed a comprehensive survey to be carried out over the telephone. The telephone interviews involved exploring the relief effort from multiple viewpoints—a process called 'triangulation'. The three groups contacted were...

- householders/landlords whose property was damaged
- business owners whose businesses were flooded
- partnering agencies who collaborated with NHCO in delivering services

Approximately 25 volunteers were intensively trained to carry out telephone surveys with householders and business owners using structured protocols developed by Cornerstone with input from NHCO. These protocols incorporated both quantitative rating scales and open-ended queries for reflection. In addition, two staff members from Cornerstone conducted in-depth, primarily open-ended telephone interviews with key personnel at partnering agencies.

From November 2005 to March 2006, Cornerstone staff and volunteers interviewed a 17% representative sample drawn from 800 householders whose homes had been damaged by the flood—N=135, all business owners who had experienced damage and agreed to be interviewed—N=30 and 12 personnel from ten partnering agencies.

In order to understand the recovery and satisfaction of householders and business owners and the effectiveness of the services they received in the aftermath of the Hurricane Ivan flooding, a variety of questions were posed...

- of the services they received, which ones were they most/least satisfied with
- of the agencies that offered assistance, which ones were they most/least satisfied with
- what, if any, problems remain unresolved
- what suggestions do they have about improving services in the event of future flooding

To understand how partnering agencies perceived their relationship with NHCO, interviewers asked the following types of questions...

- what were agencies' roles in the flood relief effort
- how, if at all, did NHCO assist other agencies in their work—what was NHCO's most important contribution to agencies' efforts and which aspects of this assistance were agencies most/least satisfied with
- how did agencies collaborate with NHCO and how do agencies perceive their collaboration with NHCO—important contributions of collaborating with NHCO and drawbacks of working with NHCO

## The Householders' Perspective

### Householders' Demographics

NHCO provided Cornerstone with the names of householders who had been assisted by NHCO and their partnering agencies during the Hurricane Ivan flood. From this list, Cornerstone drew a 17% representative sample of householders or 135 individuals. Interviews revealed that 70% of them owned the properties that had been flooded, while the remaining 30% of the householders said they rented their flooded properties.

Most of householders said their properties were located in Millvale (35%) and Etna (35%). The remaining householders were from the communities of Shaler (9%), Sharpsburg (6%) and other surrounding communities (15%). On average, the householders said that they had been at these locations for 17 years.

While many householders reported sustaining a great deal of damage to their personal property and buildings—covered, on average, by seven feet of water—76% of these householders said they continued to live at the same properties after the flood. An additional 10% relocated to different properties in the same communities, 6% relocated to different communities and 8% were landlords—some of whom continue to rent their properties. Most householders revealed their concerns about the prospect of future flooding.

### **Householders' Recovery and Satisfaction with Services**

When asked open-ended queries about the most helpful services received at the time of the flood, more than two-thirds of the householders mentioned specific types of services they received such as food and clothing and clean up assistance. Over two-fifths mentioned specific agencies—particularly NHCO, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

Then, when asked about any unmet needs at the time of the flood, almost half of the householders indicated that they would have appreciated more help with specific services like essential appliances and rebuilding as well as more financial help. However, in response to this same question a full two-fifths of the householders expressed their satisfaction with all the assistance they received, saying that there was nothing more they needed.

When read a list of services and asked to identify those they had received, the majority of householders said that they got emotional support and assistance with basic needs such as food and shelter—basic needs (83%), special projects (59%) and emotional support (58%). Many of them received services that contributed to the recovery of their personal property and rebuilding their homes—essential appliances (47%), clean-up (37%), rebuilding (30%), furniture (30%) and utilities (23%). A few householders said that they were aided financially (8%) and with transportation (4%).

Householders were then asked to rate their satisfaction with the services they had received. They proved to be content with most services—on a 5-point scale, the mean satisfaction ratings for all of the services ranged between 4.0 and 4.8, solidly in the 'satisfied' to 'extremely satisfied' ball park. Householders expressed particular enthusiasm about the special projects and essential appliances that they received. Householders expressed the least satisfaction with recovery plan services and transportation.

While most householders were satisfied with the specific services they received, a small number of householders found fault with services when they failed to meet their needs and expectations or were of poor quality. This was particularly true in the recovery phase when financial assistance and help with rebuilding were most needed. Most householders were appreciative of the services they received, but clearly would have liked even more help restoring their homes and personal property in the face of the enormity of the destruction they faced.

A small number of householders said that they did not get help from agencies because they were unaware of services available or were self-sufficient and did not ask for help. In a number of these situations, householders said friends and neighbors stepped in to assist.

At the time of the interviews, nearly half of the householders (48%) reported that they continued to have some needs that had not been met, although 44% said there was nothing they needed and were satisfied with everything. Not surprisingly, from the time of the flood until now, the need for rebuilding has moved to the top of the list as immediate needs for essential appliances, furniture and utilities have been met. It may be surprising, however, to learn that a year and a half after the flood, some householders report that they are still struggling with meeting their basic needs and with cleaning up. On the other hand, having moved past the initial devastation, we now find that some householders have turned their attention to concerns about flood prevention.

### **Householders' Satisfaction with All Agencies**

While householders were recovering from the flood damage, they were helped by a number of groups/organizations/agencies/congregations. Householders were asked to recall 16 agencies that may have assisted them during the flood and then to rate their satisfaction with that assistance.

In summary, 80% of the householders remembered being assisted by NHCO. At least half of the householders reported receiving help from the Salvation Army (68%), the Red Cross (65%) and FEMA (63%). One-quarter to two-fifths of the householders recalled the assistance of two neighborhood teams—ETNA and MAT—and two faith-based agencies—St. Vincent de Paul and Hosanna Industries. The remaining eight agencies had less than one-fifth of the householders remembering them.

Householders rated their level of satisfaction with assistance as quite high. Of the 'most remembered' agencies, NHCO, along with the Salvation Army, received top mean satisfaction ratings of 4.5 and 4.6, respectively, on a 5-point scale.

### **Householders' Suggestions for Improvements in Flood Relief Efforts**

Twenty-five per cent of the householders said they had no suggestions for improving services and another 31% took this opportunity to praise agencies for their quick responses and doing 'great jobs'. Householders making suggestions for flood relief assistance mentioned improving communications, flood prevention and immediate response.

## **The Business Owners' Perspective**

### **Business Owners' Demographics**

NHCO provided Cornerstone with the names of 42 business owners who had been assisted by NHCO and their partnering agencies during the Hurricane Ivan flood. Interviewers made multiple attempts to contact all 42 business owners on the NHCO list. Thirty business owners were interviewed.

These business owners had a variety of long-established, small businesses located in primarily in Millvale (57%), Sharpsburg (23%) and Etna (17%). On average, the owners had been in business for 21 years. Twenty-six of the business owners stayed in the same location after the flood, two remained in business, but in different locations and two business owners were no longer in business. Among business owners doing business in the same location, they reported needing an average of five months to get back on their feet, but said that they were only doing about 60% of the business they had been doing prior to the flood.

Business owners reported that, on average, their businesses had been covered by about ten feet of water. They expressed similar concern about the damage sustained to their properties and the possibility of future flooding—on a 5-point scale they rated their concerns at a mean of 3.8. Furthermore, their worries about future flooding showed a correspondence to the severity of flooding they experienced.

### **Business Owners' Recovery and Satisfaction with Services**

When asked open-ended queries about the most helpful services received at the time of the flood, more than two-fifths of the business owners were impressed with the assistance they received, mentioning specific nonprofit agencies and staff members who had been particularly helpful and attentive. They cited NHCO as being available and on-site five days a week with critical information for recovery. In addition, over one-third mentioned financial assistance as being particularly helpful, while another third identified a variety of services as critical to their recovery.

When queried about any unmet needs at the time of the flood, over one-third of the business owners indicated that they would have appreciated more help with repairs, building materials and specialized equipment. One-fifth of the business owners mentioned needing more help financially and emotionally.

When read a list of services and asked to identify those they had received, at least half of business owners said that they got emotional support (57%), assistance with resources/information (53%) and help with advertising and marketing (47%). A good many of them also received help with their businesses' physical plants—ranging from 23% to 33% depending on the service. A few were aided in areas involving running their businesses—ranging from 10% to 20%.

Business owners were then asked to rate their satisfaction with the services they had received. They proved to be content with most services. On a 5-point scale, the mean satisfaction ratings for all of the services ranged between 3.0 and 5.0—at mid-range or better with 11 of the 14 mean ratings being above 4.0. Business owners indicated particular enthusiasm with the emotional support and tangible items—money, appliances, business inventory—that they received. In contrast, business owners expressed the least satisfaction with information/resources they were given as well as various offerings designed specifically for business recovery purposes.

Despite the fact that business owners voiced mostly positive opinions about the specific services they received, they also felt that the business community was underserved—that help provided to individuals with businesses was sorely limited. Like householders, a small number of business owners found fault with services when they failed to meet their needs and expectations or were of poor quality.

Business owners shared with us that their continuing needs were primarily financial. Some of the business owners also said that they would welcome more assistance in attracting customers as well as qualified employees and continued to have need for equipment and rebuilding.

### **Business Owners' Satisfaction with All Agencies**

While business owners were recovering from the flood damage, they were helped by a number of groups/organizations/agencies/congregations. Business owners were asked to recall 11 agencies that may have assisted them during the flood and then to rate their satisfaction with that assistance.

In summary, a dramatically greater number of business owners remembered NHCO helping them than any other agency—25 of the 30 business owners remembered being assisted by NHCO. Anywhere from 7 to 10 business owners recalled being helped by nonprofit agencies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and Network of Hope; government agencies including the borough offices, SBA and FEMA and finally neighborhood teams like MAT that came together in response to the flooding situation.

Business owners were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the assistance from agencies that had helped them. Of the 'most remembered' agencies, NHCO, along with the Salvation Army, received business owners' top satisfaction rating of 4.4 on a 5-point scale. Generally, business owners indicated satisfaction with most all agencies' assistance except for the help they received from the SBA and FEMA. Both of these agencies were cited for having too much government red tape and not providing sufficient help to businesses.

### **Business Owners' Suggestions for Improvements in Flood Relief Efforts**

In its effort to do a better job of providing services in the event of a future flood, NHCO wanted to learn from the business owners themselves how assistance could be improved. To that end, business owners were asked to provide suggestions for improving services.

Twenty-nine of the business owners offered multiple suggestions most often asking for improvements in services that would make financial assistance more readily available and would enhance communication about available assistance.

### **The Partnering Agencies' Perspective**

Telephone interviews were conducted with 12 individuals from 10 agencies that partnered with NHCO in the flood relief efforts. These administrators and staff members were from agencies that represented government, nonprofit organizations and neighborhood assistance teams, many of whom were faith-based organizations. Some of these partnering agencies already served Etna, Millvale and the surrounding communities.

### **Partners' Satisfaction with NHCO Assistance**

In the course of offering relief and recovery help to flood victims, NHCO partnered with its collaborating agencies for the coordination and facilitation of these efforts. All agencies involved in this partnership reported engaging in true collaboration by giving assistance to and receiving assistance from NHCO.

There were specific types of assistance that NHCO was able to provide to its partners. It is their partners' satisfaction with this assistance that NHCO is interested in understanding. Thus, throughout the course of the interviews with the administrators and line staff, they were asked to rate and discuss their satisfaction with the assistance that NHCO gave to them.

The interviewees were first asked to rate their overall satisfaction with NHCO's assistance. Then they were asked to identify and rate their satisfaction with help they may have received in specific areas.

In short, agencies' overall level of satisfaction with NHCO's assistance was very high. Ninety-two percent of the respondents reported being 'satisfied' or 'extremely satisfied' with their overall experience with NHCO's assistance—a mean rating of 4.6 on a 5-point scale.

In specific areas, the largest number of partnering agencies reported receiving NHCO's assistance with various aspects of sharing and collaboration—ranging from 75% to 83% depending on the exact areas of assistance. A modest number of the agencies reported NHCO's help with direct services to flood victims—anywhere from 42% to 58%. A small number of the partners mentioned NHCO's help with administrative tasks—from one-quarter to one-third of the agencies depending on the type of administrative task.

Partnering agencies' ratings of NHCO assistance indicated high levels of satisfaction with all types of assistance received as well as with NHCO's overall work. Mean satisfaction ratings for NHCO assistance ranged from 4.0 to 4.9 on a 5-point scale depending on the type of help received. The most highly rated types of assistance reflect NHCO's familiarity with the community and its resources as well as its strong organizational skills.

### **Partners' Perceptions of Collaboration with NHCO**

The partnering agencies reported that they were able to accomplish a great deal of what they set out to do in the relief and recovery efforts—estimating an average of 87% of their goals met. According to these agencies, their success was due, in large part, to NHCO's assistance.

Interviewees from partnering agencies were asked to describe the nature of their collaboration with NHCO—how this working relationship lightened their load and, in contrast, how this partnership may have hampered them in accomplishing their agencies' goals. We also queried these agencies about their desire or plans to collaborate with NHCO in the future. Feedback from these agencies will position NHCO to nurture stronger, collaborative partnerships in the event of a future flood.

The administrators and line staff were asked an open-ended question about what they saw as the most important contribution NHCO made to their agencies' flood relief efforts. According to these partnering agencies, NHCO assisted in a wide variety of ways. NHCO offered...

- strong organizational skills
- good quality people
- dependable resources
- skill and hard work in building positive relationships with their partnering agencies

In short, these interviewees viewed NHCO as a great collaborator, facilitator and mediator.

Administrators and staff members were also asked to reflect on their collaboration with NHCO and discuss any ways in which NHCO may have interfered with what their agencies were trying to accomplish. They were also asked to consider whether NHCO overstepped its boundaries to take over their role in any way. Interviewees from all ten agencies said that they either had no complaints or offered praise to NHCO. Two of these ten additionally stated that one of the drawbacks in collaborating with NHCO is that its size, in relation to smaller agencies, creates boundary issues.

All administrators and line staff were asked to offer suggestions for how NHCO could better assist agencies in the future should a disaster like the Hurricane Ivan flooding occur again. Eight respondents (73%) offered no suggestions and/or gave kudos saying that NHCO is well-positioned within the community and familiar with volunteer resources. These respondents were confident that NHCO had learned lessons from the Hurricane Ivan experience and would apply this knowledge to future crises. Simply put, they thought that NHCO had done a fantastic job.

In addition to the praise, all respondents offered suggestions to NHCO for improving future efforts. Their ideas included improving communication/resource sharing and upgrading training.

But all in all, they explained that they would enjoy future collaborative experiences because they found NHCO...

- highly professional and collaborative in its interactions with other agencies
- easy to work with
- having hard-working, dedicated and congenial staff

### **Continuing Efforts**

A year after the flood, the majority of NHCO's recovery effort is complete. But the organization has promised to walk alongside all flood victims until they are back on their feet, and that is what NHCO is currently doing. NHCO staff and volunteers have re-contacted over eighty elderly and individuals with disabilities who had been flooded to assess and address their continuing needs.

When necessary, homes have been visited in order to assess the situation and determine the next steps to be taken. Volunteers have replaced electric service boxes that had been submerged in flood waters, waterproofed basements and provided help with yard work and other clean-up as needed. In addition, referrals have been made for further assistance with utilities, weatherization and engaging contractors.

Relief efforts continued through the holidays 2005 as NHCO sponsored holiday giveaways for Millvale, Sharpsburg and Etna residents. Over 500 families received holiday help. This was a collaborative effort with Network of Hope, Etna Team for Neighborhood Assistance, Millvale Assistance Team, the Borough of Millvale and Hosanna Industries. The giveaway project provided about 800 gently-worn winter coats and more than \$70,000 in gift certificates to major retailers and local businesses affected by the flood. This last part is the most important as it is a win-win situation, benefiting both flooded families and businesses and promoting economic recovery for the community as a whole. This giveaway also addressed business owners' primary concern—expressed by 41% of the business owners—that agencies need to deal more effectively with the financial problems that businesses incur during flooding disasters.

While most of the flood damage has been addressed and NHCO's temporary flood staff has been released, NHCO's general staff members are still handling calls when received and flood relief efforts are still underway in some areas of Allegheny County including Tarentum, Glendale, West Deer, etc. This assistance will require the continuing oversight and guidance of NHCO and its regular service staff.

*I think the most important thing that NHCO did was to establish an open relationship with us based on great communication, mutual strategy, and forward thinking—Administrator from a partnering agency*

**Please go to [www.nhco.org](http://www.nhco.org) to view the complete 54-page report.**