



Building Community One Good Deed at a Time

Senate Committee on Government Operations
Testimony regarding the Government Response to Flood Recovery
Friday, January 19, 2024

Good Afternoon Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'm Laura Hale and I'm the founder and president of the ONE Good Deed Fund in Burlington. For ten years now my two board members and I have been providing small grants to individuals and grassroots groups that want to do something to benefit an individual neighbor or their neighborhood, and for the last five years we've also funded larger special projects. Since 2014 we've raised and given out over \$60,000 and served as the fiscal sponsor for another \$28,000 that small groups wouldn't have otherwise been able to access.

When we started the ONE Good Deed Fund, we thought our whole fund would be dedicated to providing small grants to individuals who wanted to do a good deed for a neighbor in Burlington's Old North End (ONE). While we still keep that grant round open, it's the smallest part of our budget. The truth is, people are in crisis. More than half of our yearly budget goes to special projects where we fill in holes the government and community action agencies leave behind.

Every few weeks at least I get a message from someone who got my name from a friend or coworker and needs my help. They tell me about a heartbreaking situation that falls outside what we fund through our grants. I usually end up angry and in tears. I should turn them away but instead usually take it on as a special project and fundraise specifically to address it. For instance, last month a senior center director got in touch because a local senior on a fixed income couldn't afford to replace their broken hot water heater. There's no program that fixes that. Rebates are great, but you have to have the money to pay up front and be able to wait months to get that rebate check back. They were already working with senior support agencies to address the high utility bills that had come from months of a leaking, failing water heater, but the heater itself was outside any funding stream. In a week I raised the needed \$2,000 by asking my personal network to donate to the ONE Good Deed Fund so we could replace the water heater. In the end, this neighbor got their hot water heater but it very easily could have turned out differently. I'm haunted by the knowledge that for each person we help, there are hundreds – sometimes thousands - more in those same situations we never meet.

The work we did to help Burlington area people impacted by the months of rain and July flooding started in a similar way. I connected with a friend who works for a local homeless healthcare program doing direct outreach to folks living outside. The stories they shared were horrendous – cases of trench foot, maggot-infested wounds, third degree sunburns from living rough outdoors – and the agency that houses that program wasn't directing enough of the state and federal funds they

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get to address that immediate need. I ended up working with the program's physician and my friend to design a waterproof outdoor wound care kit that could be made cheaply with high quality materials, distributed quickly, and refilled as needed. Having already experienced push back from this agency's leadership and fundraising staff when I tried to make restricted donations in the past (I was told that the need I was restricting my gift to fund didn't exist despite hearing from front-line staff that it did) I decided to go around them entirely. I purchased the wound kit supplies the physician requested, had them delivered to my house, and my friend and I met at another friend's conference room and put the kits together. My friend then took them and a pile of water resistant laundry backpacks I also purchased and went right out into the community to hand them out. I put together a materials list and instructions and circulated them to other groups so they could be replicated.

On the surface, this looks like a success story. A grassroots collaboration got together and creatively worked to fill a need. But that ignores the truth: that this shouldn't have been necessary in the first place. So many systems failed to get to the point that I had to provide first aid materials to a large organization's healthcare program to try to keep Vermonters from dying from infected wounds.

This brings me to the government response to flood recovery. Providing feedback just on the flood response is impossible. In my world, what happened on July 12th can't be untangled from what was happening on July 9th. Several thousand Vermonters were barely scraping by before the floods. These are people who had been living with friends and relatives for as long as they could, moving frequently, getting paid under the table for child care, elder care, cleaning, restaurant help, farm work, etc. If you ask the government, these folks don't exist. They aren't on a lease or mortgage, they don't regularly file taxes, many don't have bank accounts, and they often don't have valid IDs. These are people who are existing right on the edge of catastrophe. In July, when catastrophe came, the way they had pieced together their lives made them extremely vulnerable. They lost everything and didn't have the records needed to apply for relief. I doubt they're even counted in the numbers of people affected by flooding. The first words out of my mouth when I heard about the floods were "a lot of people are going to die". I didn't mean they were going to drown. I meant that the thin string they were hanging by was going to break and they were going to die from infections, exposure, domestic violence, accidents, and overdoses.

The fallout from the flooding was the result of so many decisions made months and years before. When people were "exited" from the motels, the state didn't want to pay for camping equipment with the belief that it would be construed as approval of camping on public lands. As a result, nonprofits and grassroots groups collected donated equipment and purchased whatever they could with private funds. Again, that could be seen as a good outcome. Community came together to take care of its own. But the truth is that all that camping equipment that was lost in the rains and flooding couldn't be replaced with flood relief funds because you can't file a claim for relief for a donated tent. The problem started long before July 11th, but now we label it as a flood response issue.

The way we work right now fails everyone. The people who have the funding and the folks doing the work on the ground who need it are disconnected. State funding doesn't make it to grassroots groups because it's on a reimbursement basis so a group has to have the resources to pay for all their expenses ahead of time, it requires groups to have a large general liability insurance policy, and it requires filling out a long application and signing a lengthy and intimidating legal contract. And that's assuming they even saw the funding RFP to start with because most of the time the only way small groups find out about funding is because someone forwarded them an email blast. It's similar with large private funders. They don't want to give money to a group they don't have a relationship with, but in order to build that relationship the grassroots groups have to have contacts who run in the same circles as the funders which rarely happens. It was really heartening to see the VT Community Foundation post-flood reach out to the organizations they were already funding and ask who else was doing the work that they should know about, but this needed to happen well before July. We need more than money. We need relationships that cross economic divides. The fact that I

have friends who were living in motels and friends who were running the agencies providing services makes me the exception, not the rule. I'm able to do the work I do because I have relationships with all of those people. I don't want anyone to need support to meet their basic needs, but since they do, we have to do a better job of working together.

For all intents and purposes, the ONE Good Deed Fund shouldn't exist. It only exists because I have the skill set to incorporate and run a nonprofit, and fundraise tens of thousands of dollars, and I have lived and worked in this community for over 20 years and have deep connections to neighbors across the spectrum of income and experience. It also only exists because I've been willing to do what has been a decade-long part-time job without compensation. I'm relieved that I've been able to help as many people as I have, but I can barely sleep at night knowing that it's just a drop in the bucket.

More ONE Good Deed Funds aren't the answer. More solutions that require individuals to sacrifice themselves to provide emergency assistance aren't the answer. We need to make sure that people have the resources they need before that water ever hits. The next government response to flooding has already started and unless we find a better way to distribute what we have on every level, we're going to leave just as many people behind.