



To: VT Senate Economic Development Housing and General Affairs Committee
VT Senate Government Operations Committee

From: *The HUB* Leadership Team (Meg Seely, Jill Davies, Marian Koetsier, Denise Lyons), as reported by Anne Sosin

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Subject: Flood Relief and Recovery

This memo provides a brief introduction to *The HUB's* work, describes the impact of flooding in the catchment area served by *The HUB*, summarizes *The HUB's* response to July 2023 flooding, describes findings based on initial analysis of its work, and describes the role that community relief funds may play in disaster relief and recovery.

I. Background

The HUB is a community relief fund based in Woodstock, Vermont. Community relief funds provide financial assistance in response to both individual financial challenges and community crises including natural disasters. *The HUB* builds on the work of the Woodstock Area Relief Fund (WARF), the region's response to Tropical Storm Irene and the Covid-19 pandemic. A group of community leaders established *The HUB* with organizational support from the *Woodstock Community Trust* and the *Ottawaquechee Health Foundation* to support individuals and families in Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Plymouth, Pomfret, Reading, and Woodstock who face financial challenges due to life crises, community emergencies, and natural disasters. *The HUB* collaborates with several other local community partners and funders to coordinate immediate financial relief and ongoing support with connections to regional and state programs. *The HUB* receives funding for its work from individual donors and private foundations.

II. Flood Response

The HUB received a total of 95 applications from the Woodstock region for financial relief following the July 2023 flooding and continues to identify a small number of



households directly or indirectly impacted by flooding. While the communities of Plymouth and Bridgewater sustained the most flood damage, HUB applicants spanned *The HUB's* entire catchment area. Flood applications represented the following communities: Barnard 9, Bridgewater 20, Killington 2, Plymouth 15, Pomfret 3, Reading 13, Woodstock 33. Some applicants incurred direct damages to their homes and properties, but many others were affected by impacts to employers, damaged roadways, and other flood-related disruptions outside of their town of residence.

Flood losses and needs varied significantly across *The HUB's* applicant pool. Applicant impacts ranged from short-term wage loss to catastrophic flood damage to their homes. HUB volunteer Case Advocates conducted an in-depth intake with all applicants to assess their needs and inform the allocation of relief fund resources. More than half of applicants initially reported modest losses that could be mostly resolved with up to \$1,500 in financial support. Many of these flood relief applicants had lost wages due to damage to businesses, childcare or camp closures, or roadway outages. Roughly one in three sustained significant but repairable damage to their homes or properties. A small but important subset reported major to catastrophic flood damage. The distribution of HUB applicants by level of impact is described in the following table.

Table 3. HUB Applicants by Impact

| Levels | | | |
|-----------|----|-----|---|
| Level 1 | 39 | 41% | Short-term wage loss, but normal income flow resumed: one-time grant needed to pay bills |
| Level 2 | 20 | 21% | Minor flood damage: one-time grant needed for repairs |
| Level 3 | 25 | 26% | Significant flood damage, but repairable, e.g., need to replace major appliances |
| Level 4/5 | 12 | 13% | Major flood damage, e.g., need to replace major appliances & sheetrock, or home lost or condemned |

III. Flood Response: Early Findings

1. Community Relief Funds Prevent Cascade of Adverse Outcomes for Modestly Impacted Survivors

Assistance from *The HUB* provided full or near-complete relief from the immediate and direct impacts of flooding for 59 of 95, more than half of *The HUB's* applicants. Most of these applicants reported wage losses due to washed out roads, temporary employment closures, or disruption to other activities related to work including childcare. Many of these applicants experienced housing or financial



precarity prior to the floods; however, they had not previously accessed or relied on public or private assistance prior to seeking support from *The HUB*.

Many participants reported that assistance from *The HUB* provided immediate relief and prevented a cascade of other adverse impacts, including inability to pay rent, car payments, and other bills. Both relief recipients and case advocates further noted that these grants not only alleviated the material but also the mental health impacts of the crisis.

While rapid assistance helped to resolve the immediate needs of many in this subset of these applicants, flooding has exacerbated the precarity of even these households with the most limited impacts. In addition, some that initially presented with very modest impacts later reported more significant financial impacts. Many were already struggling to afford housing, heat, food, and other necessities prior to the flooding. Many of these applicants also were affected by ongoing and/or permanent impacts to employers, essential services including grocery stores, and roadways. Some also have other situations, including caregiving responsibilities for sick or terminally ill family members that impact their financial stability. Applicants that previously received assistance may need additional support, and some may need support from *The HUB* and other sources for the first time this winter.

2. Uncertain Recovery for Moderately Impacted

Assistance from *The HUB* helped to stabilize many of the roughly one in four applicants who sustained moderate damage to their homes or properties. Some in this group need to make minor structural repairs to their home and/or replace household appliances, while others face significant but repairable damage estimated at upwards of \$80,000 in cost. While *The HUB* has the resources to mitigate the impacts of the flooding for many in this category, it has significant concerns that applicants with more extensive damage may be at risk of housing and heat insecurity this winter.

Many flood-impacted households in this category have needs that exceed the funding capacity of current sources of support or fall outside the parameters of available assistance. Some need repairs or replacements to heating systems that will not meet the eligibility criteria for the *EfficiencyVT* recovery rebates. In addition, even applicants whose needs can be met with HUB and/or *EfficiencyVT* assistance were struggling to secure contractors to prepare estimates and complete repairs in time for winter. Even where adequate financial resources are available, some



flood victims may struggle to stay securely or safely housed. Others may resort to unsafe heating methods, creating the risk of fire.

3. Falling through the Cracks: Catastrophic Damage

A small but important group of flood victims served by *The HUB* has sustained significant to catastrophic loss to their homes and properties. Support from FEMA and *The HUB* will not be sufficient to stabilize this group of households. These families are struggling to secure information to decide on flood buy-out programs, relief programs, and housing relocation. These families are at significant risk of housing insecurity and a cascade of adverse impacts, including chronic housing insecurity and disruption to schooling. *The HUB* is concerned that the available assistance programs are insufficient to address the needs of these families and others outside its catchment area that have sustained catastrophic damage.

4. Deepening Precarity: Community Impacts of Flooding

The HUB's case portfolio offers insight into the broader community impacts of flooding in the Woodstock region. Many indicators point to a growing shortage of affordable housing, intensifying food insecurity, and increasing heat insecurity. The state faces a growing gap between housing costs and wages.¹ Early data suggests that the end of pandemic relief programs is also contributing to growing child poverty and food insecurity. Food banks and other agencies in the region report a dramatic increase in demand for food support.²

The impacts of the flooding extend beyond families that saw damage and destruction of their homes, businesses, and community spaces. Damage and depletion of the region's already aging and insufficient housing stock may further exacerbate the challenges of households on the margins of the housing market. Lingering impacts to businesses, key community services and activities including childcare may exacerbate the challenges affecting many already experiencing precarity in *The HUB's* catchment area and other areas of Vermont.

¹ "Out of Reach: Vermont | National Low Income Housing Coalition." Accessed January 13, 2024. <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/vt>.

² Sauchelli, Liz, "Upper Valley food pantries see increased number of visitors," *Valley News*, September 12, 2023. <https://www.vnews.com/Listen-Haven-food-pantries-report-increase-in-use-52213737>



IV. Role of Community Relief Funds: Opportunities and Limits

The HUB's experience responding to the flooding offers insight into the potential contribution of community relief funds and role in a larger landscape of service providers and relief activities.

The HUB builds on a long history of community crisis response and institutionalizes both formal and informal networks in the Woodstock region. It was poised to respond immediately after flooding, and it received and provided financial and material support before the conclusion of the first week. *The HUB* also had greater latitude to address gaps that may not be addressed by other sources of funding. *The HUB's* proximity to the community also enabled it to quickly evaluate individual needs and begin to survey community impacts.

The HUB's experience suggests that community relief funds are well positioned to resolve discrete crises, such as short-term loss of income or payment of bills or rent due to flooding or an episode of illness. The ability of community funds to mobilize and dispense financial assistance quickly and nimbly makes them uniquely equipped to respond in the aftermath of a disaster. Community relief funds can provide stopgap funding while disaster survivors wait for insurance payments, FEMA relief, and other forms of support. Their ability to act with greater autonomy also enables them to address needs that are time sensitive or may fall outside of the scope of work of other organizations.

Modest infusions of financial support from a community can provide resolution for simple crises and arrest a downward trajectory for many experiencing financial distress. Community relief funds also may be able to stabilize, if not completely resolve, moderate impacts from such shocks such as natural disasters. While community relief funds may not be able to address catastrophic losses from a crisis or a disaster, they can help to mitigate the secondary impacts, including lack of shelter, loss of income, or mental distress. Community relief funds can also help to assess needs, inform larger other community responses, and tailor responses to local contexts.

At the same time, *The HUB's* experience also illuminates the limits of community relief funds. Community relief funds may offer an important bridge to long-term recovery initiatives, including case management for households with catastrophic loss; however, they do not substitute for more robust recovery efforts or public assistance programs. Community relief funds are also not designed to address the underlying



precarity that makes many Vermonters vulnerable to natural disasters. Community relief funds staffed primarily by volunteers are also not generally equipped to respond to more complex cases requiring other forms of expertise, ability to navigate other services and assistance programs, and larger infusions of cash.

Recommendations for Policymakers, Funders, and Recovery Groups

Drawing on its experience, *The HUB* recommends that policymakers take the following actions to respond to the impacts of July 2023 flooding and prepare for future disasters.

- 1. Prioritize housing stability and safety for flood-impacted families.** Invest in flexible funding supports for flood-impacted households to ensure housing security and safety for households that have sustained moderate to significant damage.
- 2. Expand avenues for flexible, direct assistance to meet discrete needs and fill gaps in other programs.** *The HUB's* experience has demonstrated that rapid, flexible assistance can provide immediate relief for discrete needs, stabilize households until other forms of assistance become available, and blunt the immediate impacts for those with catastrophic losses or complex needs. Policymakers should work with other stakeholders, including private funders, to build mechanisms to fund, equitably allocate, and deliver flexible relief funding for future emergencies. With support from the Vermont Community Foundation, *The HUB* is currently conducting a study to understand the support needed from policymakers, funders, and institutions to identify supports needed to build and sustain community safety nets that include community relief funds.
- 3. Address gaps in heat security initiatives.** Some flood-impacted households in *The HUB's* portfolio have been unable to take advantage of the current *EfficiencyVT* programs before winter or are ineligible for support. Other short-term funding supports and assistance securing contractors are needed to ensure heat security. Failure to ensure short-term heat security may undermine housing stability and safety.
- 4. Develop a range of interim housing strategies.** Some households displaced by flooding have secured temporary housing arrangements; however, these arrangements may not be sustainable. A range of interim housing strategies is needed to meet the varied needs of households impacted by flooding.