Mark Peterson - Host:

I am Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

In the aftermath of disasters, when FEMA's assistance begins to phase out, the critical role of philanthropic organizations becomes increasingly apparent. In this episode, we explore how disaster philanthropy functions from the initial response phase to long-term recovery and resilience building. We'll delve into real examples of how philanthropic support has made a difference in communities across the country—from providing immediate aid to vulnerable populations to investing in long-term recovery initiatives. We'll discover how these organizations work hand in hand with local stakeholders to build resilience and create sustainable solutions and uplift communities on their journey towards recovery and resilience.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Alright, so to talk about all things disaster philanthropy, I'm thrilled to be joined by Sally Ray from the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. Sally, thanks for joining me.

Sally Ray:

Thank you.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Tell me about what the Center does.

Sally Ray:

We are primarily a philanthropy serving organization, so we do that work in, in three buckets of work. We, we do educate and inform. We hold webinars and things like that to help philanthropy understand how they can be strategic in their giving after disaster. And then we do grant making—which is where I work. I'm the Director of Domestic Funds, and so we have multiple funds that help our pooled funds or collaborative funds for philanthropy to, to add to. And then we do the grant making for them in place, in community. And then we have a consulting piece too, where we'll work with foundations, corporations, corporate foundations, and help them build their own strategy around disaster giving.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So you're primarily looking at the large donors who are wanting to contribute to disaster response in the moment, or is it before disaster strikes?

Sally Ray:

It's all of that. We want them to understand that their dollars can be more strategic if they look at phases of a disaster other than that immediate relief and response phase. The needs are gonna go on, and recovery takes a long time. So, we really try to educate them about what those needs are, how they can help prepare, build resilience in community and then afterwards help with long-term recovery.

Mark Peterson - Host:

And then also Brooks Nelson from walmart.org. Welcome.

Brooks Nelson:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Walmart does so much in, in disasters, but on the philanthropy side, tell me about the organization.

Brooks Nelson:

Sure. So walmart.org is the brand that encompasses both Walmart giving—so corporate giving as well as Walmart Foundation giving. Our strategy and ethos is really taking a shared value lens. And so how do we lead with the business and the assets that we have available to support communities? And then how does philanthropy come in and complement those investments? And so, from us, disaster preparedness and response fits under our community pillar within walmart.org. And we really think about how do we help support vulnerable communities or populations be prepared in advance of a disaster, how do we be the store of the community during times of crisis and leverage our supply chain and our logistics and merchandising and so forth to support the community, our footprint in community; and then how do we use philanthropy to help support the disaster survivors' experience and what are—what investments are needed to help shorten the recovery time for those survivors.

Mark Peterson - Host:

And so finally, Sean Visser from The Home Depot Foundation. Thank you for joining me. And so as a corporate foundation, what's unique about sort of the stance that Home Depot has?

Sean Visser:

Yeah. Well, we have a large multi-pronged foundation where our focus is on veteran housing, trades training and disaster response and long-term recovery. So specific to disaster response and long-term recovery, we have, again, like a multi-tiered program where we support preparedness across the country through stocking warehouses with local and national organizations with supplies that can utilize immediately after disaster. So these warehouses range, or like, are located from Alaska down to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. And then in our response program, we partner with local and national organizations to assist with debris removal, housing— those that have been evacuated, emergency meal distribution, mucking and gutting homes. And then we transition to long-term recovery where we'll support local organizations that are rebuilding homes that have been impacted by disasters within the past six months to a decade. So we focus on supporting hyper-local organizations that are the eyes and ears in their communities, as well as national organizations that can get in quickly while the local community is getting up on their feet. So we ensure that we support both aspects of the, the recovery organizations.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Both of your organizations essentially stem from brick-and-mortar stores that are in communities themselves, right? So how is the Foundation working directly with communities around the country, you know, before disasters and then in the midst of a disaster? Is it through those, you know, stores or, you know, how does that work?

Sean Visser:

Being in the space for a long time we have built a Rolodex of local organizations that we've built relationships with over time. Our stores are also our eyes and ears in the field and their communities because they're run by associates that live in those communities as well. So they've built their local relationships, they've built their—established partnerships, and we utilize those relationships to then shore up their existing partnerships and operations during times of disaster.

Brooks Nelson:

Yeah, I mean, Walmart takes a very similar approach. We have almost 5,000 stores across the U.S. So 90% of the population lives within a 10 miles radius of a Walmart. And so it's really critical that we are that store of the community and our operators and associates who work in those stores know the community. We equip them with tools. We have our Spark Good platform, which is, which is a whole suite of tools for the local nonprofits to utilize in blue sky days, but we also leverage it during times of disaster. But then we also, on the preparedness question, we have been investing in providing capacity and technical assistance to local community organizations in more vulnerable populations across the Gulf Coast actually aligned to FEMA's community disaster resilience zones. And so thinking about how do we invest in these community-based organizations so that they can help prepare some of the, the projects and programs that will be eligible for FEMA funding through the CDRZ Act.

Mark Peterson - Host:

What do you mean by technical assistance in that regard?

Brooks Nelson:

Yeah, so we've invested in fellows that are placed across five states across the Gulf Coast who are actually placed in a local community government's office. And they're working with the different CDRZ zones in those states to help do landscape assessments, identify opportunities for resilience projects, think about funding opportunities that are available. And then we've also invested in another model on a community navigator program. And so, a kind of an anchor institution in four states the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida who are doing a very similar model. And in some states there's actually a community navigator and fellow in that state. And so they are actually working collaboratively to help support those CDRZ designated communities.

Mark Peterson - Host:

That's way beyond helping provide commodities in, in after a disaster. This is thinking far in advance of any disaster. Right.

Brooks Nelson:

Yeah.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sally, you, you talked a lot about helping philanthropy being—be more strategic in the disaster space. What does that mean?

Sally Ray:

Well, these, these two gentlemen certainly represent a big—good strategy for disaster. But not every organization has that. We say when—a disaster happens when a vulnerability meets a hazard. So if you can take away that vulnerability when a hazard comes, you don't have a disaster. So we also say that every funder is a disaster funder. So if you're funding in education, you're funding in healthcare, you're funding in social justice, environmental justice, you are funding—you're a disaster funder. Because if you eliminate that vulnerability in that space, you aren't gonna have the disaster. So we try to educate philanthropy about understanding that, understanding their role. We work an awful lot with local community foundations to help them know what their role is when a disaster hits their community, how they can stand up a fund, how they can engage with their local partners, how they can prepare for and, and prepare their community in a resilient way for that.

Sally Ray:

But certainly, you know, what we try to do is use our grant making that we do as an example of how to be more thoughtful and more strategic and understand all of the phases of a disaster. And, and don't just immediately say, here's, here's money out the door for, you know, whatever happens relief. And those dollars then can't be used for all these other things—for talking about, you know, let's build the resilience of this community. Let's build the capacity of this community for response for the long term. Let's bring in long-term recovery specialists who know that we're gonna more resiliently build here, so that there's not—when the next one comes, we don't have to rebuild it again, right? Or, or this family's safer in a or in a better place. So helping them understand all of the things that are going on in the space and how they can come alongside and fill gaps and, and be thoughtful about where the government dollars are going and where other people's dollars are going and how they can fit into a space that makes sense and is more strategic and leverages those other dollars.

Mark Peterson - Host:

What are the grants that you're—that the Center is, is making?

Sally Ray:

We do global grant making, but I oversee the domestic space. There's a team of us that works in that space. And after a disaster, we'll sit back and we'll wait. We'll connect with our local partners on the ground. We wanna know what's happening, what the, what, what the issues are. We actually do what we call shoe leather philanthropy. We go into community, we meet with fellow funders, we meet with local community organizations, we meet with survivors and we try to really understand what the needs are in that community. And then we share that with our philanthropic partners; and then we'll make grants according to what we learn from that. So we do a vision for every single one of our funds that will, you know, address what those needs are for that specific event.

Sally Ray:

We do have some flexible funds, and so we're able to invest in some of this resilient building, capacity building. We often are the capacity builder funder, 'cause a lot of folks are like, oh, we wanna help build 10 homes to help these people recover, or a hundred homes. But we're like, okay, well you need a construction manager, you need a volunteer coordinator, you're gonna need a, a disaster case manager and a navigator for that process. So we often will fund the people, or even a warehouse space. We've worked with some of our national partners to make sure that some of those warehouse spaces are available and accessible. So just a whole variety of funding. We, we often have funded advocacy to keep the attention on that community and the needs, the needs of the community.

Mark Peterson - Host:

It's so important.

Sally Ray:

Just what we learn when we go into that space, what we know from our long-term relationships that we have across the U.S. And across the world, really.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yeah.

Sally Ray:

That's—we use our experience and our expertise in that space to, to make the right grant, hopefully in that community.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I've often heard the Center of Disaster Philanthropy being referred to as a hub, bringing in you know, donors to meet the need. But from an organization standpoint, from a foundation standpoint, how do you determine what your priorities are in any given year or cycle for giving?

Sean Visser:

Yeah, you know, we stick close to our mission, but we can get creative with it. You know, with The Home Depot, our wheelhouse is housing; which is a huge category. So when we talk about you know, long-term sustainability within housing, our goal after disaster is to get people back in their homes, keep them in their homes. And the way that we can keep them in their homes is by rebuilding back with affordable building methods, you know, utilizing eco-friendly products that reduce utilities, reduce electricity to reduce that monthly rate. And then how can we incorporate hazard mitigation building practices down the line so that when a future disaster happens, the loss will be reduced. So I say that as an example because it just starts with the house and housing. But we are able to create a really well-rounded strategy on how keeping people in their home, like what that truly means for generational wealth and then making it more affordable, but our overarching mission is rooted in housing, but we can take different avenues to get to to that end game.

Brooks Nelson:

Yeah. And for Walmart, I think we have very similar principles that we use as we're making decisions, but take a different approach because we are the largest grocery retailer, consumer goods, and so we're more focused on the immediate needs. What is a disaster survivor need in those first 72 hours? And how do we, you know, lean in, leverage the business, how do we, we call it life sustaining, what do they need to sustain life? And then how do we be hyperlocal and fast to execute because we know that the community needs those goods immediately.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sean, you, you brought up something that I, I'd like to explore a little bit more, but the idea of sustainability. Resilience, sustainability, these are all—.

Sean Visser:

—all buzzwords

Mark Peterson - Host:

Well, buzzwords are not, you know, I mean, it's definitely something that we need to be thinking about as we're faced with more and more disasters, right? So, specifically, how is home—Home Depot Foundation thinking through the idea of sustainability and contributing to that resiliency? I mean, you, you talked about mitigation. Yeah. that can be on the micro level, right? Or it can be on the community level.

Sean Visser:

Yeah. Yeah. So kind of similar to what, what Brooks was talking about, we're focusing on the most vulnerable communities and the most vulnerable individuals within those communities first. And so we're really redesigning our investments to be more like place-based, where it's, let's go into a community—I'll use Habitat Butte County, for example, our partner up in Paradise, California—susceptible to wildfires. And we've learned from them to understand, well, what is the strategy behind rebuilding in this community? And where can we fit in with what Home Depot can provide? So their goal is to get people back in their homes; to build new affordable homes. And so I take a look at that, and I'm like, well, how can we fit in to leverage our dollars, leverage our resources, leverage all of the skews that we have in our Home Depot inventory to identify the specific types of supplies that would benefit Northern California.

Sean Visser:

So there we're able to identify certain types of windows that we can utilize in our inventory, certain types of ventilation systems, certain types of siding that will incorporate into the, the rebuilding or new construction process. So that if and when they are impacted by another disaster reduction will be lost. And we're doing that house by house, by house and really trying to leverage our dollars across as many homes as we can by bringing in our inventory. In addition to hazard mitigation, we're incorporating energy efficiency. Our goal is to make housing more affordable. And by doing like simple things like low flow toilets energy efficiency, light bulbs, low flow, you know, water fixtures in the, in the shower, we can reduce consumption for those homeowners so that they may be able to have a little bit more cash in their pocket every month. So ours seems like really granular when it comes to the individual homes, but we're spreading that across multiple homes, multiple housing complexes in the same community. And then we're gonna identify the next one and go from there.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sure. I mean, that sounds like a, a really interesting philanthropic initiative. Sally, you know, can you think of some other, you know, really successful initiatives that you've been a part of?

Sally Ray:

Yes, well actually I started with the Center for Disaster Philanthropy after Hurricane Harvey. I was based in Houston and just actually moved there when Harvey hit and connected with Center for Disaster Philanthropy and, and, and managed that. And part of what I saw happen there was neighborhoods that were close to—in a flood zone that were close to rivers that had flooded and, and broken their banks on multiple occasions, probably needed to not be built there. And although sometimes it's really difficult to relocate people, we were able to relocate an entire neighborhood in Victoria County. It was a huge partnership that happened there. Multiple nonprofit organizations, including the local Habitat for Humanity, multiple funders coming together, the county government coming together, and the, the survivors, the homeowners that, or, or renters that had lived along there were agreeable. And we just up and moved it to higher ground to a, a less vulnerable location. And then the housing was built to a more resilient standard, and it was, it was a lovely opportunity to just completely relocate a neighborhood into a much safer place. So we've removed a vulnerability, so when the hazard comes, again, there's not a disaster in that particular neighborhood, and that's happened a few times across the country, but that was one that I remember and was particularly excited about.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I have to think that there's probably a priority for Walmart. Just knowing that it's the largest grocer in the country of maintaining stability in local farmers, you know, that might have been affected by disasters. Do you prioritize work in that space?

Brooks Nelson:

From a disaster standpoint we definitely—we think about the communities that are impacted and where the needs may lie. You know, just recently there was the wildfires and the Texas panhandle. And so as we thought about how we were gonna support that community, the ranchers were definitely impacted as well as some of the, the farm workers who lived in those communities. And so we were conscientious about that funding. But beyond just our disaster work, two or three years ago now, our CEO came out with a regenerative pledge and really thinking about how do we continue this ethos of a shared value model of leading with the business, but make it towards regeneration.

Brooks Nelson:

And so leaving the planet better, you know, then we've left it really, but a lot of that focus is on regenerative agriculture. And so both from the business side and our merchants we actually have a regenerative cattle ranch that Walmart has partnered with outside of Arkansas. And so our merchants are doing it on one side, but then on the walmart.org side, through our sustainability focus, regenerative agriculture land, reuse regeneration is also a very big strategy as part of that philanthropic pillar. So, yeah, absolutely. It's definitely a commitment for us.

Mark Peterson - Host:

With all the resources that are coming into play, both in immediate disaster response and recovery, but then into long-term recovery there's a potential for duplication of efforts, right? So how does the Center for Disaster Philanthropy get involved in sort of understanding what's available—helping governments understand what's available, and then, you know, sort of deconflicting the resources that are available to any number of communities?

Sally Ray:

Let me just start by saying, there's, there's never enough money to do what needs to be done, and our goal certainly is to make sure that there's an equitable recovery for all, right? And, and that just—the reality is that's not happening. It doesn't matter. And yes, there might be duplication of effort, but really, honestly, that's very rare and doesn't happen that much. Part of what we do though, is build those relationships with local emergency managers, with the VOADs, with state VALS, with FEMA VALS. I talk to a FEMA VAL about every other day—who are helping us connect and know and understand what's going on in the particular community, where they are. And we have just that basic experience and knowledge of what's gonna be available from federal dollars, what is available statewide, what other funders are doing. We're communicating with other funders regularly, what local funders are doing.

Sally Ray:

I—right now, for instance, you know, Brooks mentioned the wildfires in Texas; I've been in communication with a local funder there. What are you doing? How are you doing it? They've asked us to—you guys are great at that long-term recovery, hold off. We're gonna help connect you locally and, you know, with other people, and we're going to, here's what we are doing. When you can come in later and help us here, that would be really great. So just really having those relationships. It really is relationship driven, and it's important that we have those. And honest to goodness, it's, it's oftentimes the state VAL or the state emergency manager, or even a county emergency manager who calls and says, hey, Sally, can I connect you to this nonprofit organization here who's really doing some amazing work that could use a little help building their capacity to continue to do it. That's really important for us to have those relationships. All of it is very driven by that. We go into community, like I said, we—the only time we couldn't do that was during COVID—but when we can, that is very critical for us to do our work appropriately and effectively. And, and, and just level of experience on our team and the knowledge of what the needs are gonna be, what that community's about. That's really critical for us.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I know that both of your organizations—Walmart and Home Depot have their own, you know, focus areas; but to use Sally's phrasing, if you take away a vulnerability you know, it, it affects the outcome of the disaster, and so, where do you see your organizations or disaster giving, evolving to in the future, knowing that, you know, we are potentially faced with a very intense hurricane season. You know, the cycle of disasters, it seems like we're never really out of response phase. Where do, where do you see things evolving to?

Sean Visser:

You know, to kind of piggyback on what Sally was saying, it's, at this point, it's all about collaboration. And we are talking to each other and we're starting to have conversations at a core foundation level as well as like other partners like Sally's group. How can we each come in and take a piece of the pie for response and recovery? 'Cause none of us have the budget for it—to do it all on our own. We shouldn't do it on our own. And there's—it's just so multifaceted that each of our missions can really be part of a piece of response and recovery. They're all tied together. How do we invest in one community at a time—the most vulnerable, where we can, again, each take a piece of the pie of a community, support it, shore it up so that they're in a better position for a future event.

Sean Visser:

So we are talking to each other, we're exploring collaborative opportunities. Another thing I love hearing Sally say, and, and what we really do at The Home Depot Foundation as well, is like, cash is king, and capacity building is huge. So wherever we go, we're, we're not—and I want other funders to hear this, like, it's not just about product donations, that's huge. But you also need to support the capacity building of these organizations with trucks, you know, with staffing, with tech that they need so they can be better equipped to then get in faster and activate faster.

Brooks Nelson:

From a walmart.org perspective, you know, we really think about systems change for all of the pillars and programs and strategies that we're driving. And so, for disaster specifically, I mean, we think about the programs that are stood up, the policies that exist, how are the flow of resources coming? And so until we're really thinking about how can we influence every level of systems change, we're just gonna continue to put money at the problem, really. And so, you know, I'm encouraged that we are investing more in the preparedness of some of these communities. Appreciative of the FEMA CDRZ framework to help us prioritize where we should be driving some of those investments. I think that'll continue to be a trend for us as we think about how we invest in preparedness, but also I think system-wide, there needs to be a transformation especially as we continue to see more and more disasters due to climate change.

Sally Ray:

I love to hear him talk about systems change. I mean, that's really what we need to see. So we often invest in advocacy. We invest in, in journalistic—nonprofit journalism to, to zone in on what, what's going on in, in each community to understand and communicate that out, and share that out so that we can know and share with fellow funders what needs to be done. Investing in mitigation, investing in infrastructure, investing in capacity, community capacity, and investing in education so that people know and understand. The CDRZ framework is tremendous. It's, it's one step. You know, it's a baby step. We have a lot more to do. The new policy and procedures for IA that FEMA's come out with, that's great. It's wonderful. Let's see how it happens, how it rolls out, and then let's learn from it and do more.

Sally Ray:

I know FEMA can't do it all, and there are limitations on what FEMA can do, but government dollars are a lot bigger than philanthropic dollars. And so that's really where that system needs to be, right? And we need to be the partners in that and come alongside. And so, helping philanthropy understand what the role of government is, what their role is, and how we can partner together and be more thoughtful and strategic in building the capacity and sustainability of these communities. And the intersection. Let's be really honest about this. The intersection of climate change, social justice, equity, and disasters—those things, they intersect. And, and when we, like I said, when you can take away that marginalization, that vulnerability, we have to address that, then you will take away the disaster. So it's a big, big puzzle. It's a lot to think about, but you know, there are baby steps that are happening, and I'm enthusiastic about that, and I'm, you know, cautiously optimistic about things.

Sally Ray:

But hearing these two talk about, you know, what their vision, what their focus is, and what they're investing in, I mean, that gives me hope. And that, that people are hearing what we're all saying and what we, what we wanna do. And, and it's about partnership. It's about, you know, really changing the systems and meetings like this where we begin to have those conversations with all these great organizations that are doing this work. That's how it's gonna happen. We're all talking about it. We're all having conversations. But next step, it's action. We gotta act.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Hey, thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at FEMA.gov/podcast.