

The eye of the storm

Written by Scott Gray, CEO, Minneapolis Urban League
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Moving our community from crisis to stability

In a split second, on what began as a normal Sunday in Minneapolis, the harsh winds of change wrought the most shattering tornado to hit our community in some 30 years. In its wake is devastation projected to exceed \$166 million as damage assessments continue to reveal ruined homes, compromised non-profit and government facilities, wrecked businesses, and destroyed infrastructures.

Our loss has been tremendous, and while it is difficult to think positive and even acknowledge the extent of our loss, we all know that considering the intensity of this storm, we are lucky overall that the loss of life and damages are not more severe. This of course offers little consolation as we all watch our community struggling to find its way back to normalcy.

Thousands of North Minneapolis residents, the majority uninsured renters, are faced with the prospects of rebuilding their lives. With the place they once called home in a state of disrepair, uncertainty looms large. Relocation is not easy in this situation – leaving the future unclear. Sure – there's support out there, but how much support does the future hold? How long will that support continue? In the face of such disruptive change, it's only human to at first be numbed by what has happened, then become tremendously upset, searching for a way to cope. Ideally folks will tap into their resiliency, ultimately finding a way to thrive.

Our community is to be applauded for swiftly rallying to lend a helping hand. Gov. Mark Dayton, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, and members of the Minneapolis City Council have demonstrated genuine compassion, responsive leadership, and have marshaled all of the resources at their disposal to support a rebound from all the upheaval caused by this natural disaster. United States (U.S.) Senator Amy Klobuchar, U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison, House Speaker Kurt Zellers, and state Senator Linda Higgins toured the area to see firsthand the extent of the destruction, and surely gained a keen understanding of just how tragically the storm has shattered the lives of this community's residents.

Noted as well, are the thousands of volunteers who have given their time and energy to distribute food and water, offer various kinds of comfort and assistance to those impacted, and are helping to clean up our city. Non-profit and faith-based organizations have united to identify, plan and collaboratively deliver wrap-around social and human development services to our neighbors who have without question been emotionally and physically sideswiped by the eye of this tornado.

Before the tornado, this was a community already in the midst of a storm; some 270 homes were foreclosed last year in the area described as the hardest hit; boarded vacant homes were plentiful; unemployment hovered at rates three times the national average; educational and personal underachievement and nagging underemployment were commonplace. The challenges that confronted this community before the storm will continue to impact its vibrancy in the absence of sustained efforts to stabilize the people and the families that live here.

It is clear that the journey to stabilizing and revitalizing this community will be long and arduous – change won't be evident in the short term; in fact the rebirth of this community may take two to

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three years. However, the optimistic outlook is that this journey will be equally laden with opportunities to begin anew. What is needed is an actionable strategy to achieve this end, and more important, the financial support to make it happen. It is essential at this juncture that those controlling the purse strings invest enough resources to fully regenerate and redevelop this community, refusing to employ a “band-aid” strategy that can only serve to leave this already bruised community more crippled post-tornado.

One cannot help but notice that people are always just a little kinder, just a bit more considerate, a tad more appreciative just after a storm ends. This outpouring is tremendously moving to see. However, this “afterglow” is for the most part short lived. Once people get their conveniences back, and revert back to former life routines, strategic action dwindles, and compassion, concern and kindness for others can swiftly cease. We cannot let that be the case in this instance. We must earnestly work as a united city, state and community to provide the tools, resources and support necessary to reinvent North Minneapolis. Additionally, we must continue to usher forth solutions that can foster sustainable stabilization of families.

Currently, the Minneapolis Urban League, in partnership with numerous other organizations and volunteers is working to support short term needs such as emergency housing repair, transitional housing, food, clothing, health and wellness support. The exciting thing is that we’ve all agreed that we must also, just as importantly, find solutions for supporting the long term needs of this community.

Critical to elevating the community is constructive action around re-housing, job development opportunities, continuous volunteer mobilization, youth engagement, economic development and contracting opportunities. Those of us in community service must also maintain a focus on communication, which is critical in this rebuilding period.

While our community may be facing one of its greatest challenges, we have an opportunity to transform North Minneapolis from a place of crisis to a showcase of the power of outcome-focused, strategic execution, fueled by collective effort. By harnessing our inventive thinking, varied talents, and shared vision, North Minneapolis can become a replicable model for other locales that, like this community, are already in the eye of the storm before the actual storm makes its full presence known.