

# The Coordinated Assistance Network for Disaster Management Expands Agency and Caseworker Participation

Supporting the Coordinated Assistance Network (CAN): Bringing agencies and communities together to build a coordinated response to disaster management

#### **SUMMARY**

From December 2007 through November 2008, CAN (Coordinated Assistance Network) further developed and deployed its Web-based tools to help disaster relief agencies coordinate their services and share information in the aftermath of natural disasters or terrorist incidents. The American National Red Cross manages CAN.

## **Key Results**

- Disaster relief agencies that use CAN increased from 259 in 2007 to 350 by the end of 2008.
- The number of caseworkers capable of creating and maintaining client records within the CAN database increased from 4,539 in 2007 to 5,756 in 2008.
- CAN opened four new portals on its website to manage disaster clients. These portals provided case management support to agencies in more than 30 states.

## **Funding**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project with a grant of \$730,000 from December 2007 through November 2008.

## THE PROBLEM

After a major disaster, it can be difficult for people to navigate the maze of social service agencies available for support. Victims must repeat their stories to different agencies' caseworkers; meanwhile, social services agencies sometimes waste resources by duplicating assistance efforts because they do not know who has received help and who still needs it. Members of vulnerable populations are the most likely to miss out on available aid, resulting in an inequitable distribution of support.

In 2003, several leading nonprofit disaster relief agencies, including the American National Red Cross, the United Way and the Salvation Army, established CAN (Coordinated Assistance Network) to address these issues. Designed to manage nongovernmental relief work, CAN provides resources to help communities set up a system whereby relief organizations can share information and coordinate services in the event of a disaster. (See CAN website for list of national participating agencies.)

A steering committee made up of representatives of nine national disaster relief organizations guides CAN's efforts. (See Appendix for list of organizations.)

## **CAN's Data-Sharing Tools**

CAN uses technology to foster interagency collaboration during disaster response and recovery efforts including these Web-based tools:

- Client Registry. An online, secure database for relief workers to log in and share
  information about each client's disaster recovery history. Case managers must be
  trained by CAN and authorized to gain access to these records. Access is password
  protected. Government agencies, such as FEMA, may not use the client registry. (See
  the CAN website for more about privacy.)
- Resource Database. A searchable list of all resources available in a community enables a case manager to quickly link clients with what they need. Example:
  - If a client needs a motorized wheel chair, the case manager types "motorized wheelchair" in the search field of the database, and CAN pulls up available resources. With a few clicks, the case manager can enter that information into the client's record, call up directions to the providing agency and then e-mail the agency that the client will pick up his/her wheelchair.
- Content Management System. Every disaster generates a huge amount of data, reports, maps, photos, guides and other information. The CAN website collects all available data about a particular disaster in a library, including facts on the number people injured, number of houses destroyed, how long the event lasted, approximate cost and the demographics of the affected area. Communities facing a disaster can gain access to this information without a password.
- Support and training on CAN's various tools

#### **Implementing and Testing CAN**

In 2004, CAN chose six pilot cities—New York, Oklahoma City, Seattle, New Orleans, Washington and San Francisco—to implement CAN and test models of community readiness and response. The cities shared certain characteristics including a location justifying enhanced levels of readiness and existing engagement in interagency planning.

The agencies in each city began to work on disaster preparedness, adopting standards for sharing information, collaborating and coordinating their relief efforts.

Shortly after the pilots were established, CAN faced a gigantic test of its system, beginning with the string of 2004 hurricanes, and then Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Agencies that had previously been reluctant to share information saw the value of collaboration through CAN, entering data on thousands of clients in its shared database.

## **How CAN Deploys**

In a disaster, any nonprofit relief organization in an affected community can request that CAN be deployed. Then, if the CAN Steering Committee decides the request is warranted, CAN opens a portal on its website to organize information and resources. CAN generally identifies these deployments by the nature of the disaster—for example, "Summer Storms 2008" or "California Wildfires."

These incident-specific portals allow relief agencies involved in a particular recovery effort to input and access client and resource data related to that disaster. Information is instantly accessible to other CAN participating agencies, helping to ensure timely delivery of services without duplication of effort.

When the bulk of the recovery effort is over, CAN archives the disasters as "completed deployments." Details of individual client records are not available after a deployment is complete.

#### THE PROJECT

From 2007 to 2008, CAN (Coordinated Assistance Network) further developed and deployed its Web-based tools to help relief agencies coordinate their services and share information in the aftermath of major events such as natural disasters or terrorist incidents.

The American National Red Cross managed the project.

## **Other Funders**

These organizations have supported CAN since its founding:

- Lilly Endowment: \$2.5 million in 2004
- Ford Foundation: \$2 million in 2005 and \$1 million in matching funds in 2007 (matching the RWJF grant)
- John Morgridge Family Trust: \$250,000 in 2006
- Altria Group, Inc.: \$250,000 in 2007

#### **CONTEXT**

The project aligned with the Vulnerable Populations portfolio's objective to provide meaningful services to children and at-risk families, the homeless, frail elders and new immigrants. The project was part of the Katrina Relief Fund Initiative, founded to help provide equitable relief and support for communities, organizations and people impacted by Hurricane Katrina and other disasters.

#### **RESULTS**

In reports to RWJF, the project director reported that during the grant period:

- The number of agencies and caseworkers connected to CAN increased significantly. These increases indicate CAN is being widely used and accepted as the national resource database.
  - Organizations that use CAN increased from 259 in 2007 to 350 in 2008.
  - The number of caseworkers capable of creating and maintaining client records within the CAN database increased from 4,539 in 2007 to 5,756 in 2008.
- In 2008, CAN opened four new portals on its website to manage specific disaster recoveries. These portals provided case management support to agencies in more than 30 states. The portals were:
  - 2008 Winter Storms
  - 2008 Spring Storms
  - 2008 Summer Storms
  - The Catholic Charities-USA Disaster Case Management Pilot portal, a model for the distribution of FEMA funds designated for case management under the post-Katrina revisions to the federal Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act designed to bring an orderly and systemic means of federal natural disaster assistance for state and local governments

#### **LESSONS LEARNED**

- The walls that separate agencies are not as high as they might appear. Some
  disaster relief agencies had been reluctant to share information when CAN
  (Coordinated Assistance Network) was first founded, perhaps because of concerns
  about losing their agency's brand identity or client privacy. (Project Director/Leipold)
  - However, the process of working together over time through CAN's Web-based tools helped allay agencies' concerns, especially as they saw the value of Web-based cooperation and information-sharing in the wake of the Hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

"We are the cutting edge of technology in this sector," explains Leipold. "Now there is understanding of how partnerships enhance our total service delivery because they allow for more efficient distribution of resources and reduce duplication of services. This understanding within the sector was a direct outgrowth of CAN. It sounds simple, but it was an organic process that took several years to achieve." (Project Director/Leipold)

#### **AFTERWARD**

CAN continues to be the leading technology hub for the disaster relief sector. It has secured funding through June 2009 from the American National Red Cross and its Hurricane Recovery Program. The network's steering committee is assessing different business models that might sustain CAN into the future.

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Grant ID# 57295

Program area: Vulnerable Populations

### **APPENDIX**

## **CAN Steering Committee Organizations**

(Current as of the end date of the program; provided by the program's management; not verified by RWJF.)

Members of the following national organizations sit on the steering committee of CAN (Coordinated Assistance Network):

- Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS)
- American National Red Cross
- Catholic Charities USA
- Lutheran Disaster Response
- National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (National VOAD)
- Salvation Army
- Southern Baptist Disaster Relief
- United Methodist Committee on Relief
- United Way of America