

Columbine aid a massive enterprise

Steve Raabe
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April 16 - With money still rolling in, donations to victims of the Columbine High School shootings have generated what's believed to be the largest single-event fund-raising effort in Colorado history.

Businesses, individuals and nonprofit groups have contributed more than \$9 million to aid victims of the April 20 massacre.

In addition, the state and federal governments provided \$6 million in disaster aid.

Officials say the collection and disbursement of money for Columbine has been one of the most effective and coordinated of any national disaster.

It has been so effective that the Mile High United Way has chronicled its efforts and is girding for the day when another community afflicted with a disaster calls for advice.

"We drew on the experience of other communities that had gone through tragedies," said Kelley Cahill, a vice president at Mile High United Way. "Since then we've tried to document our efforts along the way. You just hope to God you never have to pass it on." The United Way's Healing Fund was announced at 5 p.m. the day of the Columbine shootings. It quickly became the primary vehicle for fund-raising, helping consolidate what otherwise could have been a splintered effort with scores of entities taking in and attempting to distribute millions of dollars.

Many of the businesses and nonprofit groups that launched fund-raising efforts eventually funneled their donations to the Healing Fund.

Others remained independent. Safeway, for example, chose to raise and distribute more than \$200,000 on its own because it had pledged that the money would go directly to victims.

Other fund-raisers pooled their efforts under other groups such as the Denver Foundation and the Jefferson Foundation.

Groups still soliciting funds include HOPE, which plans to build an atrium and new library at the high school, and the Foothills Foundation, which is planning a permanent memorial.

The United Way's Healing Fund became the largest of the fund-raising entities, teaming with the McCormick Tribune Foundation and its local partners - the charitable arms of The Denver Post, KOSI 101 and WB2.

Although sporadic criticism arose over the timing and method of distributing money, the Healing Fund began disbursements to victims six days after the shootings.

Within six months of the tragedy, the fund effectively had closed its books by collecting and distributing \$4.6 million.

"We knew it would not be a perennial fund," Cahill said. "We learned that there has to be an end to it."

The United Way had seen problems that arose from other cities' disasters in which collected funds were held for long periods of time, prompting anger from intended recipients.

For example, much of the \$452,000 raised in Springfield, Ore. remains undistributed almost two years after the May 1998 shooting in which a 15-year-old boy killed his parents and two classmates and wounded 22 other students.

The community's Healing Fund directors have been criticized by many for their policy of holding the money in escrow for long-term medical needs, instead of giving it directly to victims.

Now the fund is making plans to disburse the money.

In Colorado, donations from individuals, businesses and nonprofit groups were supplemented by public money.

The federal government spent almost \$5 million assisting local agencies in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings. The state government spent more than \$1 million.

The first grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, for \$1.5 million, came in immediately to local authorities, said Carol Poole, deputy director for the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice. That money was given to 28 state agencies, including the sheriff's department, police and ambulance services.

The U.S. Department of Justice also gave \$1.1 for victim programs. The money helped pay for counselors for the Jefferson County School District and the Jefferson County Center for Mental Health.

Another payment of \$750,000 from the Justice Department helped with victims' compensation, including medical bills not covered by insurance, lost income and funerals. Attorney General Janet Reno released \$1 million for increased school security, half of which went to Jefferson County, Poole said. The other half went to other Denver-area schools. The U.S. Department of Education gave \$500,000 to the Jefferson County School District. "I think it speaks to the magnitude of the crime and the effect it had on federal officials," Poole said. "This has got to be an incredibly expensive crime." Locally, \$1 million was released from state funds when Gov. Bill Owens declared the shootings a state disaster, Poole said. Half of that money went to the Jefferson County School District, \$375,000 went to Jefferson County and \$125,000 went to the Jefferson County Center for Mental Health. Also, the Colorado Department of Health gave \$25,000 to Jefferson County.

Contributors Kelley Harp and John Ingold