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SPECIAL TO PR NEWS – CSR GUIDEBOOK 2008

FOR RELEASE

BEYOND BRICKS AND MORTAR: OUTREACH & EDUCATION REBUILD REAL ESTATE CAREERS PUT ON HOLD BY HURRICANES

By Edward M. Bury, APR

The monumental storms that ravaged the Gulf Coast in 2005 truly were catastrophic to communities across four states. More than 1,800 people died, and property damage was estimated at \$92 billion. But the hurricanes did more than take lives and destroy property and businesses. Careers were put on hold or derailed, including the careers of professionals who earned a living in commercial real estate brokerage, leasing, consulting and development.

In the weeks following hurricanes Katrina and Rita, leadership and staff of the CCIM Institute, a commercial real estate association, and the Education Foundation of the CCIM Institute mapped out strategies and implemented tactics designed to reach these goals:

1. Provide immediate financial assistance, housing and job opportunities, and career and business guidance to members from Gulf Coast cities and towns displaced by the storms.
2. Re-establish regular education courses in the region, offer scholarships and financial support and encourage pursuit of the CCIM designation.

The collaborative relief program proved to be daunting. Travel to the area was challenging, if not impossible, and telephone and internet communications were unreliable at best. Yet, the efforts yielded positive results that can be measured more than two years later.

A leader in advanced industry education, CCIM Institute offers a curriculum that delivers core skill sets needed to excel in the competitive commercial investment side of real estate. Completion of CCIM education is a key step in earning the Certified Commercial Investment Member (CCIM) designation, recognized as one of the most prestigious in the industry. Courses also offer participants tremendous networking opportunities, critical in a referral-based industry like real estate.

With the region's infrastructure in shambles, hosting courses in a major market like New Orleans was out of the question in late 2005. Members needed immediate assistance to secure basic human needs like shelter. Within days of the hurricanes, CCIM Institute made a \$15,000 donation to the National Association of Realtors'® Realtors Relief Foundation, and many CCIM members made individual donations. Money raised was allocated through state Realtor® associations to help members find housing.

The Institute also quickly created an online forum that allowed members to communicate, offer assistance, and provide updates on their work status. The availability of the forum was made known through email messages, a prominent link on www.ccim.com and through phone calls to established members in the Gulf Coast. In the weeks following the hurricanes, the forum generated dozens of postings and proved to be a vital communications link between the Institute and its members. Several CCIMs even used the site to offer temporary living and office space, business referrals and job opportunities. These early efforts sent the message that colleagues around the nation were concerned and wanted to help.

A phone survey revealed that real estate professionals required something beyond housing and financial support; they needed advice on how to jump start their professional careers and livelihoods. Within eight weeks after the storms, CCIM Institute mobilized real estate experts from around the country to participate in the Gulf Coast Relief Tour, three no-cost, one-day seminars open to any regional real estate professional.

Funded largely by the Education Foundation, the day-long sessions were held in early November of 2005 in New Orleans, Gulfport, Mississippi, and Beaumont, Texas. Recognized experts provided insight on filing insurance claims, insurance litigation and dispute resolution, real estate law and related topics. More than 200 attended. What's more, the volunteer CCIM leaders who coordinated and orchestrated the Tour provided much-needed moral support for their fellow real estate professionals, many still struggling to rebuild their personal and professional lives.

By late first quarter 2006, many Gulf Coast communities began returning to normalcy. Hotels and businesses started to open, telephone and online communications were restored and travel options improved tremendously. Leaders of the CCIM Louisiana Chapter said members were enthusiastic about getting back to business. These favorable conditions prompted CCIM Institute to accelerate relief efforts by re-introducing education.

The Institute launched a concerted program provide core courses to help real estate professionals in postal ZIP codes designated by the federal government as being hardest hit by the 2005 storms. Through a \$30,000 grant from the Education Foundation, the Institute offered full tuition scholarships to its regular five-day Core Course education program and financial support for costs related to other components in the CCIM Designation process: Submission of the Portfolio of Qualifying Activities, the two-day Course Concepts Review and Comprehensive Examination.

Based on membership in the area, more than 160 students were eligible to take at least one course in 2006, and nearly 100 would be able to complete the four-course curriculum by year's end. At the Comprehensive Examination held October 19 in Tampa, eight scholarship

recipients from the area earned the CCIM Designation. An additional 15 others earned the Designation in 2007.

Funds also were allocated by the National Association of Realtors through its local associations to host the Institute's *Introduction to Commercial Investment Real Estate* course. This two-day course offers insight into fundamentals of the commercial investment process. *Introduction* courses were held to give residential real estate agents basic knowledge of the commercial side of real estate. With the housing market brought to a near standstill, residential agents gained some basic skills and knowledge of a new genre of the industry. Eight classes were held in three states over a seven-month period, and 388 students participated.

For more than 40 years, CCIM Institute has provided commercial real estate professionals with the practical skills they can use in the marketplace. Bringing education back to the Gulf Coast was of paramount importance once the region stabilized and commerce returned. Efforts made to rebuild careers helped communities recover from the greatest natural catastrophe to hit our nation.

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