



How To: Creating a Federal Form Brigade

CASE STUDY

Soon after a string of tornados tore through Madison County, Tuscaloosa and other parts of Alabama in April 2011, the Rev. Kerry Holder-Joffrion and Zara Renander learned that storm survivors had 60 days after the storm to register for individual assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They realized that people suffering from the shock of the disaster and resulting devastation might not have the wherewithal to register for government assistance, and many would need help with this crucial task as quickly as possible. Renander told Holder-Joffrion, “Sixty days is nothing, what if we can make sure to help people simply register – just start at the beginning?”

They first went to the local ecumenical organization, the Madison County Interfaith Mission Service (IMS), of which they had been active members and staff for some time. Madison County IMS began in 1969 to promote religious, racial, and cultural harmony during the Civil Rights Movement. According to their website, “the organization has a rich history of over 40 years of promoting religious harmony and interfaith dialogue, cultural and racial dialogue, and being an advocate for positive change in the Huntsville area.”

Renander and Holder-Joffrion spoke to their IMS colleagues about the idea of creating a team of volunteers to help homeowners navigate the process of applying for federal disaster aid. Together with the IMS, they contacted the local FEMA office to find out what they could do. FEMA sent the community a staff person who helped them train and create the Federal Form Brigade.

Over 300 volunteers walked door-to-door encouraging homeowners to register, often sitting with them to fill out the forms together. If homeowners were away, the volunteers kept coming back until they were able to speak to them. Holder-Joffrion said, “We just weren’t going to give up on our neighbors.”



Biography



The Rev. Kerry Holder-Joffrion works with the Madison County Interfaith Mission Service (IMS); Zara Renander is also a member of the Madison County IMS.



Fast Facts



DIOCESE: Alabama
DIOCESE SIZE: 32,400

LOCATION: Madison County, AL
POPULATION: 334,811

DISASTER TYPE: Tornado
DAMAGED / DESTROYED
HOMES: 337

DISASTER RELIEF:
Guiding homeowners through the registration process for federal disaster aid.



The program focused on helping people who were eligible for benefits, but who might have difficulty with or were wary of registering. Many people struggled with the forms, from the elderly, to anyone who had trouble accessing the internet. A number of head-of-households were undocumented immigrants, afraid to file for fear of being caught. Volunteers explained to them that if one person in the household had a valid US social security number they could file for assistance under that number. This eased fears, and a number of these households registered.

The Federal Form Brigade also had centers staffed with volunteers, computers and internet access on Saturdays at different churches; this way homeowners could also come to them. Initially, they posted signs along the interstate advertising these services. Then, when power was restored 10 days later, anyone could access information they had posted on their own website and other community-based websites about the importance of filing and the services they were providing.

START YOUR OWN FORM BRIGADE PROJECT

- **Get trained.** The person sent from FEMA set up a series of webinar trainings for us. Over 300 volunteers, including the two of us, were trained at various churches across the city. We organized five trainings; one training each Saturday for five weeks. The webinar covered the requirements for filing and how to file.
- **Create a website.** Use the site as a portal for both volunteers and people seeking services. Alice Brown, a member of the IMS and a stay-at-home mom who home-schools her children, didn't have a lot of time to work in the field but she did know how to create websites and offered to help. Alice created one section on the site where impacted homeowners could sign up, another section for volunteers to sign up, and a separate section with a log-in where coordinators could update and organize information on the thousands of homes volunteers had canvassed. Without that website we could not have collected and processed the data in time to meet the deadline.
- **Actively seek out those you can help.** We sent trained teams of two door-to-door with business cards to meet with people on their property. These teams carried laptop computers so if there was Wi-Fi nearby, they could register on-line right then and there. Volunteers also carried cell phones to register by phone. Sometimes it's actually easier to register by phone because an agent works with you through the whole process and doesn't hang up until you are completely done.

Accessing Individual Assistance:



- **Check** to see if your county is covered by a disaster declaration:
<http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema>
- **File** a claim with your home or auto insurance for damages.
- Apply online at: www.disasterassistance.gov or by phone: 1-800-621-FEMA (3362). Hearing/speech impaired ONLY should call: 1-800-462-7585.
- **Have the following information** with you when you apply: your Social Security number or the number of a member of your household, a description of losses caused by the disaster, insurance information, financial information, contact information and banking information.
- When your application is complete, FEMA will provide you with an **application number**. Use this number to check your status at any time starting 24 hours after you submit your application.
- If you are deemed eligible, you will be contacted by an **inspector** to set-up an appointment to assess the disaster-related damage to your property.
- Within 10 days of the visit you will receive a letter informing you of the decision on your request. An application for an **SBA loan** may be included with the letter. If it is, you are required to apply for the loan before requesting individual federal assistance.



- **Have a place where homeowners can find you.** Simultaneously, we also opened Form Assistance Brigade Centers at local churches of different denominations in all affected neighborhoods. These centers had long tables set up with volunteers, laptops and cell phones on hand to help. Be sure that any building where you have a center has electricity, enough electrical outlets and a steady Wi-Fi connection.
- **Publicize your services.** We publicized on websites, the radio, newspaper and TV. We also posted small signs along roadways that pointed to Form Assistance Brigade Centers.
- **Reach as many people as possible.** We got the Governor to extend the filing deadline another 60 days and continued training volunteers past the initial deadline, so we had more time to reach more people.
- **Provide a variety of services.** In those first few days, there was nothing to do but take care of each other. We would bring coffee, donuts and other supplies with us, or sit down and play checkers with homeowners. We just kept coming back, eventually getting them to file.
- **Diversity in the volunteer pool is important.** We purposefully asked a variety of churches to host the volunteer trainings and got a variety of volunteers from their pews. The African-American churches were at the forefront of leadership for this program, which was pivotal given the multicultural dynamics and neighborhoods where survivors lived. They credentialed the whole program; some homeowners registered with us where they might otherwise never have done so. The Min. Yolanda Black, an African-American leader from Eagle's Nest Ministries and a fellow IMS member, is doing a superb job directing the program now.
- **Connect with other faith organizations before a disaster and work together to respond.** Without the cooperation of IMS and the trust network that binds our community together, disaster relief leadership would most likely have emerged disjointedly and not been as effective.

FEMA could not have been more thrilled, cooperative or encouraging of our efforts to work alongside them as supporters and neighborhood advocates. In the end, Madison County, though one of the lesser populated areas of devastation, was the top county in the state of Alabama for FEMA filings, with approximately 17,500 applications. We out stripped Tuscaloosa (the hardest hit and a larger community) filings by over 5,000 applications. FEMA took notice of the numbers early on and continued to ask for our assistance throughout the process. They understood that our deep-rooted tradition and strong ties with our community gave us an “in” with people who might otherwise have slipped through the cracks. By working with us they could reach those people and ensure increased coverage.

Partnerships:



- **Build relationships before a disaster.** Our Interfaith Mission Service has built relationships with the local media over the years. We knew the news managers and contacted them directly. They in turn knew who we were and were happy to work with us.
- **Build relationships in the moment too.** We contacted FEMA soon after the storms. If we hadn't we would never have known that our community could request a Voluntary Agency Liaison (VAL). Our VAL helped with the webinars, and stayed in the community as an agent to connect us to available funds.
- **People respond readily to their neighbors.** Even though a FEMA tent was always located at the same location...MANY people preferred to work with the Form Brigade. The trust level was different because they knew us, they knew we cared, and we kept showing up.

Additional Resources



For more information on federal aid after disasters please see the following online resources:

- “How Federal Disasters are Declared”

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.er-d.org