



# How To: Community Crisis Canvassing Project

## CASE STUDY

When the town of Munster, Indiana was flooded in September 2008, over 1,000 homes were damaged and 5,000 residents were evacuated. With his vestry, The Rev. Bennett Jones of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, a small family-sized parish in the Chicago area, agreed that it was more important to decide *who* they helped than focusing on *what* they gave them. For their response efforts, the congregation at St. Paul's Episcopal Church raised \$12,000 from Episcopal Relief & Development, their diocese and other private donors to buy 247 \$50 gift cards from a local all-in-one store. Through a list provided by the city, they distributed the cards to people who needed more help than the government could provide. They canvassed sections of the neighborhood in teams of four, distributing the cards and listening to home owners' stories. After the cards were all gone, the volunteers met at the church and shared their different stories from the day.

## START YOUR OWN COMMUNITY CRISIS CANVASSING PROJECT

### 1. Assemble the necessary volunteers and supplies

**A. Look to what resources you may already have.** All we really needed for this project were printed cards with our church information and a prayer, the gift cards, pens and clip boards. Our church had planned a big bike-ride fundraiser a couple of years earlier so we had most of these supplies left over. We even had first aid kits that teams were able to take out with them.

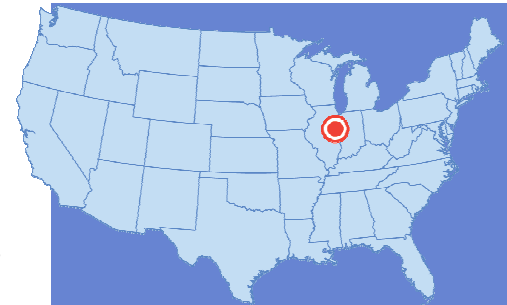
**B.** Without volunteers this project can't happen, so a big part of the planning process is getting those volunteers.

I tried to get as many volunteers from the church as possible. In the end we had 30 people, about half the congregation, come out to help distribute cards, but this project could have had many more.



### Biography

The Rev. Bennett Jones was rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Munster, IN.



### Fast Facts

CONGREGATION:  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
CONGREGATION SIZE:  
75 members  
LOCATION: Munster, Indiana  
POPULATION: 22,500  
DISASTER TYPE: flood  
AFFECTED HOMES: 18,000  
DISASTER RELIEF:  
Distributing gift cards to  
persons in need



- **The best way I found to get volunteers was to call each family personally.** That way I could tell them what exactly it was I needed them to do. I explained they would be working in teams so they would never be alone, and answered any other questions they had.

**C. Get and/or create any supplies you don't have.** Try to use what you already have as much as possible so that you can use the bulk of your budget for buying more gift cards.

- **Buy the gift cards.** Because I was making such a big purchase I found it easier to buy the cards through the store's website and have them delivered, as opposed to buying them directly at the store. Also, by buying in bulk and online I was able to get a discount and buy more than the 200 I had originally planned.
- **Get a big map of the area.** This way you can block off streets/sections for each team. I used Microsoft Streets and Trips to create maps.
- **Make name tags.** I created name tags that hung around the neck that included:
  1. Volunteer's name
  2. The name of our church
  3. Episcopal Shield
  4. Episcopal Relief & Development logo
- **Develop any necessary forms, etc.** Keeping track of inventory to show our donors was very important to me. Each card was assigned a number for inventory purposes. Records indicated which teams had which cards. As cards were distributed, the card number was indicated next to the recipient's address. You should also keep in mind what kind of follow-up you want to do, and make sure you have the information you need for that. Getting a phone number so you can call someone back, for example, could be very important.

## 2. Decide *who* is a priority and where they are

We agreed that the people we wanted to prioritize were those that might not get enough help from government sources.

**A. Find out which people are falling through the cracks.** Through a parishioner we were able to contact the city; they gave us a list of people with needs greater than the help the government could provide.

**B. Use the big map to look at where the most damage happened geographically.** Marking the map to show the areas of most damage can help pinpoint where teams should concentrate their efforts.

## 3. Organize the distribution

Make sure you have a clear plan for distribution before the day of the event.

**A. Divide volunteers into teams so they don't have to work alone.** We had teams of two pairs, working the same section of neighborhood together.

### Lessons Learned:



- **One thing I wish I had done was to have at least one or two people help me with the organization and logistics.** Because I had experience with that during a bike-ride fundraiser two years earlier, I was the logical person for this, but it was a lot of work and I could have used help.
- **Doing a follow-up with the flood-affected families is very important.** We had a small follow up a year later, but if I were to do it again there are a couple of things I would do differently:
  - Make sure you follow up within the first 3 months. When we tried contacted people a year later, some were hard to find – either contact information had changed or they'd moved away.
  - Invite recipients to speak. What we did in our follow up was to invite recipients to the church to talk about their experiences a year later.
  - Make sure you involve volunteers in the follow-up. Another thing we could've done was have the original 30 volunteers call people they found with outstanding needs to make sure they had received assistance.



**B. Use the big map to divide up the areas of distribution.** This way each team will know where they are going, and which homes are priorities. Each team was given a print out of the specific streets they were to canvass. With MS Streets and Trips this was very easy.

#### 4. The day of the event

**A. Meet beforehand.** It's a good idea to go over the program with everyone.

- **Find a space to meet.** Often the church will be most convenient. If it's far away, look for other options. If possible, make sure any place you use has bathrooms and space for everyone to sit.
- **Training.**
  1. Explain what each team will do and where they will go. Train them in the use of any forms. I created forms that allowed for easy recording of the recipient's address and included places for team members' names and the card numbers they received.
  2. Also keep in mind what you think the best way to record information should be. In Munster, one team member recorded information while the other spoke to the homeowner.
  3. If you think your volunteers would benefit, have a 10 minute chat on pastoral care and how to listen empathetically before starting out. Because the St. Paul's volunteers were so close to the disaster, they were able to be empathetic and had a good idea that much of their job would be to listen.
  4. Give volunteers the names and numbers of other organizations they can refer recipients to in case people need other services. I gave our team members a hotline number for a clearing house set up by the city, which they recorded on their team form.
  5. Make sure any necessary safety precautions are taken. We sent people out with first aid kits we had left over from the bike ride.

**B. A debrief at the end of the day is very important.** Volunteers will have seen and felt many new things and will likely want to share their experiences.

- **Have a space for debriefing to take place.** Again, a central meeting place with chairs and bathrooms is best.
- **Identify someone to lead the discussion** – as the parish priest I led our discussion. I asked volunteers to share the stories of people they met, how they were received, and how people interacted with them.

#### 5. Recognize everyone who participated in the project.

I thanked volunteers in the newsletter and recognized them during services. I also sent thank you letters to all our donors.

#### Remember!



- **Have a back-up plan.** In Munster, we had a few preselected recipients that we wanted to make sure got a card. If one of them wasn't at home the day of the distribution, volunteers just moved on and continued to hand out cards, saving the undelivered card for later distribution. A week or two later, a different team returned to give that family a card.
- **It's important to recognize everyone who participated in the project.** Here are some ways to thank everyone involved:
  - Recognize volunteers in the church newsletter and during service
  - Send a typed or handwritten letter to all your donors

#### Additional Resources



For more information on flood response, please see the following online resources:

- "Flooding in Pontiac, IL – Helping the Most Vulnerable"
- "How To: Preventing Exploitation of Disaster Clean-Up Workers"
- "Community Crisis Canvassing Project: Distributing Gift Cards in Munster"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at [www.er-d.org](http://www.er-d.org)