



Disaster Response – Follow in Their Footsteps

How To: Providing Pastoral Care to Immigrant Workers

CASE STUDY

In the wake of the floods that submerged downtown Cedar Rapids, IA, low-income immigrant day laborers were brought in to help with the clean-up efforts. These laborers were required to work 14-hour days, seven days a week. They were not required to wear protective gear, and many were not given tetanus shots until there was intervention. Many of these workers were housed at Cornell College, where Catherine Quehl-Engel is the College Chaplain. Quehl-Engel spent time with workers at the college, and after discovering the conditions the laborers worked and lived in, she provided pastoral care and became an advocate for them.

The Rev. Quehl-Engel believes that cleaning up the community and getting businesses and government buildings reopened as quickly as possible should be a priority, but this should be done safely. We can rebuild and reopen in a way that ensures humane treatment of day laborers, and also avoids overwhelming already stretched hospitals.

Some steps our churches and communities can take include:

START YOUR OWN PASTORAL CARE FOR IMMIGRANT WORKERS PROJECT

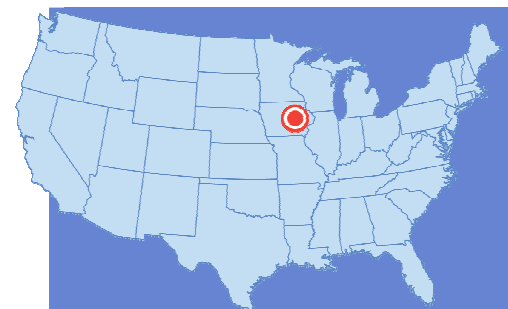
- **Ask city officials and business owners to inquire about labor practices before hiring a cleaning service – this includes inquiring about the practices of temp agencies used by the cleaning companies.** Ask if tetanus shots are required and provided, whether wearing safety gear is enforced, how many hours of sleep are required of workers in order to stay safe on the job and what procedures are in place to ensure adequate food and water is provided.



Biography



The Rev. Quehl-Engel is chaplain at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, IA and priest associate at Trinity Church, Iowa City.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
Cornell College –
Episcopal Diocese of Iowa

LOCATION: Cedar Rapids, Iowa
POPULATION: 255,452

DISASTER TYPE: Social / Flood
DISPLACED PEOPLE: 25,000

DISASTER RELIEF:
Pastoral care for immigrant workers providing cleaning services for homes and businesses after a flood



- **Learn from missteps in other cities amid disaster clean up and inform city officials and business owners – some of whom may be members of your congregation or other houses of worship in your community.** The management of the temp agency I talked to claimed they were overworking laborers because of pressure and expectations by business owners for quick clean up. These owners didn't know how this was impacting laborers.
- **Ask day laborers directly if they have received tetanus shots.** If they haven't, find out and direct them to clinics with free tetanus shot available in your community.
- **Ask day laborers directly whether they are able to access their food allowances.** The company I contacted gave day laborers approximately \$15/day on a debit card (when and if the debit card worked) for purchasing food and beverages. Eating out is therefore not an affordable option, so most laborers wanted to purchase groceries for preparing inexpensive meals. If you are in a smaller town with a grocery that opens at 7 a.m. and closes at 10 p.m., these workers will be unable to purchase food because of long work hours. If you find that this is an issue, consider asking the grocery store manager if s/he can accommodate staying open for an extended hour so workers can buy food, and work with company management to arrange a mutually convenient time. Also consider having your community's houses of worship take turns preparing supplemental sandwiches, tortillas, etc.
- **Be a pastoral presence on the work site.** Walk the cleanup areas in clerical collar and jeans, thanking the crews for their presence and for helping to resurrect your community. Pray for them.
- **Be a pastoral presence at home.** You will need to work with management to know the best time frames for making pastoral care available and how to go about communicating this to workers. Things to think of ahead of time: If there is a language barrier and you are not bilingual, bring in translators to assist you with prayers for healing/anointing/laying on of hands, hold a make-shift Eucharist, provide prayer beads (I went through over 100) and post a reflection in both English and Spanish from the Daily Word or other resources in a communal area where they sleep/cook/do laundry.
- **Consider providing large communal boxes of laundry soap** if you know they are staying at a location with washing machines.
- **Use the established relationships you have with workers to advocate for their health.** Some immigrants may be reluctant to go to the emergency room if they have a serious injury or work related infections. Bilingual clergy and others whom they can trust are essential, especially if workers have not been provided tetanus shots.
- **Inquire about laws to protect the exploitation of workers if you suspect unsafe labor practices are occurring.** This may include sleep deprivation (like with truck drivers, this leads to increased injuries). If there aren't any such laws in your community, find someone to help change that.

Remember!:



Cleaning service agency management will also need pastoral care. Those people directing clean up efforts may be as stressed, sleep deprived, and in need of pastoral care as their workers. Trust that they might simply not have the information they need, and you can also provide information for them about local resources/hours of services (i.e. Laundromats, grocery stores, how and when to provide spiritual care to workers). If needed, encourage them to improve the care of their employees.

Additional Resources



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

- "Flooding in Pontiac, IL – Helping the Most Vulnerable"
- "How To: Community Canvassing Project"
- "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