



10 Tips for Responding to a Disaster in Your Community

CASE STUDY

On August 28, 2011, Hurricane Irene flooded areas of the northeastern United States. In Tuxedo Park, New York, the flooding was exacerbated when a dam upstream from the town broke, sending more than 100,000 gallons of water into a neighborhood called the East Village, located across the street from St. Mary's Episcopal Church. According to the church's Rector, the Rev. Elizabeth McWhorter, the community, including members of St. Mary's, pitched in immediately to help clean up debris and clean out damaged homes.

In addition, McWhorter and local Roman Catholic priest Father Emmanuel coordinated volunteer teams to make contact with those most severely impacted by the flooding. McWhorter and Emmanuel trained volunteers before sending them out to talk with their neighbors. The training encouraged volunteers to put themselves in their neighbor's shoes, and to offer assistance in a way that preserved the dignity of those whom they were serving. The volunteers then went door-to-door in the East Village, connecting with people, listening to their stories and recording their needs. These needs were matched with donated items. This approach was about making sure to meet people's actual needs, rather than offering "one size fits all" assistance.

THINGS TO KNOW

Reach out

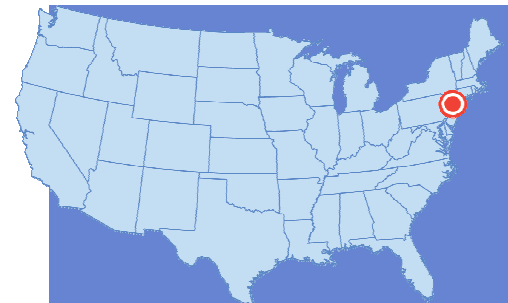
- **Don't wait for a disaster.** Establish relationships in your community now, before the disaster.
 - Get in touch with local school personnel, specifically counselors. In times of emergency, these people will be working with children in the community, and can offer insight into needs of local families.
 - Meet with local fire fighters, emergency personnel, and police officers. Get to know local leadership and invite them get to know you. Provide them with emergency contact numbers for your parish.



Biography



The Rev. Elizabeth McWhorter is Rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Tuxedo Park in the Diocese of New York.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
St. Mary's Episcopal Church
CONGREGATION SIZE: 450

LOCATION:
Tuxedo Park, New York
POPULATION: 750

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane Irene flooding
AFFECTED HOMES: 42
DATE: August 28, 2011

DISASTER RELIEF:
Community engagement



- **The most important assistance you can offer starts with just making contact.** Shock, confusion and pride often prevent people from knowing where to go and who to ask for help. Making personal connections is the first step to people getting the help they need.
- **Consider reaching out to local businesses for support.** They might also be looking for ways to get involved and help after a disaster. The local gas station loaned us the trucks we used for furniture transport.

Think Long Term

- **Expect the needs of the affected community to change over time.** Try to meet the needs of that particular moment. For us, the first week after the hurricane and the subsequent flooding was about helping our neighbors to clean up. We encouraged people to take shovels, gloves, bleach, rags and whatever else might be helpful to those in affected areas. We also put out a plea for fans and dehumidifiers. A week later the concern was about furniture and other items that had been lost.
- **Keep asking what people need.** As needs change, be sure to keep asking the people you serve what other/new needs they have so that you can be sure you are providing services that are truly needed at the moment they are needed. We are now two months out and with winter on the horizon, people in the affected community let us know that what they need are furnaces, hot water heaters and electrical panels.

Use Volunteers

- **If you call on volunteers, be sure that you are organized and have tasks for them to do.** Also, thank them afterwards; it really makes a difference!
- **Prepare your volunteers!** Basic sensitivity training can help them to approach the affected community in a way that preserves dignity.

Know your resources

- **Help get donations into the community.** Local municipalities can't receive private donations to give to individual families. Because most churches have 501(c)(3) status, you can easily set up a separate account to receive and disburse monies for the community. Keep in mind that discussing how, when and to whom the monies will be distributed is very important right from the outset.
- **Your physical building is a community resource.** Remember to offer the space for people to gather and connect after a disaster.
- **Keep gift cards on hand.** When an emergency occurs, you'll be able to offer immediate assistance without having to think about where the money is coming from. Cards to local grocery stores or "big box" stores are always useful.

Pray

- **Pray always.** As God uttered at creation "It is not good for anyone to be alone." In times of trouble and disaster, no words are truer.

Lessons Learned:



- **Impacted communities remain vulnerable.** Long after the immediate disaster is addressed, affected communities remain more vulnerable. Less than two months after Hurricane Irene, an early snowstorm hit the North East. Many homes still needed repairs and families who had not yet replaced furnaces and boilers damaged in the flood had no heat.
- **Actively look for people to serve.** Many times those who need your help most are already being served by your existing outreach ministries. Ask them what they need and how you can help.
- **Keep asking those you are serving what they need.** As needs change, those most affected are many times best placed to tell you what those new needs are.

Additional Resources



For more information on responding to communities in an emergency, please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Emergency Shelters"
- "Success Stories: Assisting Neighbors Through Cold Drinks and Laundry"

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