

Faith Communities & Disaster Volunteerism

Volunteering is an important part of individual and community response to a disaster. It creates solidarity within and between communities as it taps the enormous reservoir of gifts and skills of individuals who desire to serve their neighbors near and far in times of crisis.

TIP SHEET

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NDIN encourages all potential disaster volunteers to pre-affiliate with a VOAD partner or a local volunteer center. Many faith communities also offer volunteer opportunities for those who can pre-register to be deployed locally and/or nationally. Check with your VOAD or emergency management agency for guidance, training and opportunities.

DISASTER VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Some organizations have formal disaster programs in which your congregants can participate. Some examples include:

- **American Red Cross** : www.redcross.org.
- **CERT** (Community Emergency Response Teams): CERTs are groups of neighborhood and community-based volunteers that undergo an intensive, 11-week training program in disaster preparedness and basic response skills. After completing training, these teams act to support their local communities by assisting the various emergency agencies that prepare for and respond to disasters. Visit www.citizencorps.gov/cert to find your local CERT.
- **Citizen Corps Councils** leverage voluntary citizen involvement, through the coordination of interagency resources, to create a culture of preparedness among a community's most vulnerable populations and to enable individuals community-wide to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. To learn more, visit www.citizencorps.gov; enter your ZIP code to find local programs.
- **Medical Reserve Corps** volunteers include medical and public health professionals such as physicians, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, veterinarians, and epidemiologists. They supplement existing emergency and public health resources. Visit www.medicalreserve.org.

MANAGING DISASTER VOLUNTEERS IN YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP

It is important to preserve volunteer spirit, and to help volunteers to stay motivated and prevent burnout. Ineffective management of volunteers can create serious complications. A strong volunteer support program will help to overcome this problem. Some tips for creating a successful volunteer program include:

- **Have a coordination plan**: Without a plan, it is difficult to manage—and impossible to retain—volunteers.
- **Require background checks and training**, especially for volunteers who will drive, or work with children or the elderly.
- **Pre-identify disaster projects**: Indicate likely types of projects (gutting homes, rebuilding, casework, donation collection and distribution, etc.) and the types of skills that will be needed. Develop volunteer job descriptions including skill sets.
- **Provide training**: Train volunteers and educate them on expectations, procedures, reporting structures, etc., so that they know what is expected and can succeed within your structure.
- **Identify skills**: Identify the skills your volunteers bring to the table and utilize them.
- **Encourage full participation**: Welcome all who volunteer, but provide for appropriate matching of age, gender, and skill-set to faith traditions and practices.
- **Support and care for volunteers**: Ensure that volunteers have the support needed to maintain their own well-being, such as necessary supplies, guidance, health information, mental health resources. Their safety should always come first; it is important to have realistic expectations of volunteers.
- **Recognize volunteers**: Be sure to recognize volunteers for the work they do, in formal and informal ways. This recognition does not have to be expensive; it can be done in low-cost, creative ways.
- **Provide mental health and spiritual care services to volunteers**: Remind volunteers to care for themselves, and provide them with support and resources, including NDIN Disaster Tip Sheet on Mental Health and Self-Care.
- **Be clear about programs and projects**: Provide detailed information about projects, purposes, goals, conditions, hygiene, food, work hours, health/safety concerns, etc. Be clear about the skills needed, and match volunteers with projects that match skill levels and expertise. Ensure volunteers have meaningful and constructive projects to assist their communities.
- **Limit work hours/Give time off**: It is important that volunteers take time off from their work as disaster volunteers. This will allow them time to take care of personal matters and to rest, which helps to reduce burn-out.
- **Discourage self-deployment**: Do not respond to a disaster site or encourage others to do so until need has been determined. Conditions may not be safe or appropriate for volunteers.

DISASTER VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Within your faith community, there is an abundance of talent and many who will want to participate as volunteers. If you create plans to support your existing/disaster-specific programs, you will be able to utilize volunteers effectively. First steps:

- **Identify partners.** Reach out to other congregations and faith communities that you are likely to partner with in disaster recovery. Identify ways to share resources and expand volunteer opportunities. Plug into community networks and strategize with partners about volunteer retention.
- **Seek expertise.** This publication offers good guidance and volunteer management expertise (excerpted below*):
“Preventing a Disaster within the Disaster: The Effective Use and Management of Unaffiliated Volunteers.”
 You can find this document by going to <http://www.cert-la.com/education/disasterbook.pdf>

POTENTIAL DISASTER VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES BY PHASE OF THE DISASTER LIFECYCLE

An effective program can include roles for volunteers in each phase — mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Mitigation

- Survey community sites with Emergency Management officials to identify/mitigate risks.
- Identify and disseminate information on easy, cost-effective ways to protect against potential dangers to property.
- Retrofit your house of worship/other structures to help minimize the most threatening hazards.
- Clean storm drains and gutters and remove debris to allow the free flow of potential floodwater.
- Rehabilitate abandoned lots in your neighborhood into gardens that provide proper drainage.
- Plant vegetation in areas that are at risk for mudslides and landslides.
- Install smoke alarms in all properties within the community.
- Distribute smoke alarm batteries and/or reminders to change batteries and check alarms.
- Move/Replace fire-prone shrubs and other landscaping away from the sides of your house of worship/other structures.
- Clear dead brush and grass from properties so it does not fuel a spreading fire.
- Conduct minor repairs on the homes of the elderly to protect against wind damage.
- Install and/or secure storm shutters on all appropriate properties.
- Install cabinet locks; secure appliances and equipment using flexible straps to reduce loss in earthquakes.

Preparedness

- Obtain necessary training in disaster exercises with established disaster relief groups.
- Contact your Volunteer Center, local emergency management agency, or VOAD to learn if there are community disaster preparedness projects offering volunteer opportunities..
- Contact your state or local Citizen Corps Council to learn about outreach for citizen preparedness activities.
- Learn about disaster preparedness and first aid training opportunities available locally or through web-based programs.
- Develop awareness about emergency management issues through best practices, newsletters, and publications.
- Develop personal, family, and business emergency response plans including appropriate supply kits.

Response

- Learn more about volunteer needs and opportunities through designated voluntary agencies.
- Before traveling to the area of a disaster, determine needs for volunteers and obtain information on how to register.
- Help with such activities as:
 - Sorting donated goods at a donations management warehouse
 - Cleaning up debris
 - Sandbagging during floods
- Supporting voluntary agencies in organized collection drives, **based on identified needs**
- Find creative ways to raise money for disaster relief (garage sales, local charity drives, etc.)
- Provide moral support to first responders by sending thank you cards, flowers, etc.; volunteer with groups that provide support to the families of first responders away on emergency duties.
- Check in with congregants, especially the elderly or infirm, to see if they need assistance, support, or someone to talk to.
- Follow guidelines set by local officials as to what volunteers can and cannot do on-site.

Recovery

- Help/Contribute by participating in supervised operations:
 - Organizing community clean up projects
 - Repairing and rebuilding

OTHER RESOURCES

- **Book - *Managing Spontaneous Community Volunteers in Disasters: A Field Manual*: <http://www.crcpress.com>**
- **Church of the Brethren - Disaster Volunteer Handbook/Resources: <http://www.brethren.org/bdm/volunteer.html>**
- **Hands On Network: <http://handsonnetwork.org/nationalprograms/neighbor>**
- **National VOAD-Managing Spontaneous Volunteers: <http://www.nvoad.org/resource-library/documents>**
- **Vision Link - <http://visionlink.org/disaster-volunteer-management.html>**