

Emergency Communication Plan for Houses of Worship

Growing up as I did in New Orleans, we lived each year with the possibility of disasters, both hurricanes as well as flooding. As I moved around the Southern United States over the first 30+ years of my life I continued to experience disasters time and time again. Multiple hurricanes, beginning with Betsy and Camille, interspersed with occasional tornadoes and flooding were parts of my experiences. Over the past 30+ years I have come to realize that preparing for disasters is something that everyone should do, but even more so that the faith community has an obligation to its members and its community to engage in this process. During this time I have been blessed to be a part of multiple teams that have responded to disasters --- hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and wildfires. It led me to become certified as an Emergency Responder through UMCOR, and as such I have participated and led teams in responding to multiple disasters. It also helped me to understand the importance of being prepared. As consequence of this understanding, through my work with the Faith Working Group of the Southeast Climate and Energy Network (SCEN), we developed a checklist for congregations to use in preparing their members for any disasters that might affect their community. This is certainly not a final and complete list. Rather, it is intended to be used as a template for developing a plan for each local church and their community. Hopefully, this will be useful to you as you plan for the future.

The purpose of this group is fourfold:

- 1) To establish means of rapid communication of essential information regarding disaster response when normal lines of communication are open.
- 2) To establish a protocol and the ability to disseminate information in the event of internet and cell phone communication interruption.
- 3) To give houses of worship and individual members the tools necessary to communicate with their members during a climate related disaster and to provide them with a menu of actions that need to be undertaken prior to a disaster, during a disaster, and post-disaster.

- 4) To give houses of worship suggestions on how to advocate for their members and how to interact with governmental and other NGO's before, during, and after disasters.

It is understood that many of the volunteers who serve in disaster response capacities come from faith-based organizations. So, it is essential that there be effective communication between municipalities and other governmental entities, faith-based organizations (including churches and larger church bodies), NGO's, and individuals leading up to, during, and after any climate related disaster.

In order for houses of worship to be effective, it is important for them to have a cadre of trained volunteers who can serve as translators and to provide translation. This includes a minimum of Spanish language as well as American Sign Language (ASL). It is also important to have mental health professionals on call as well – those who know how to work with persons with mental illness and/or developmental delays (MHMR) and Child Protective Services for minors separated from their parents.

PRE-DISASTER CHECKLIST OF COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE CITY/ MUNICIPALITY

- 1) What toxic facilities are the regulatory agencies shutting down and/or prepping for shutdown.
- 2) Who is the designated disaster response person for the city/county.**
- 3) MAKE SURE THE CITY IS SIGNED UP WITH FEMA ahead of time.
- 4) Check with big box stores in the surrounding area about what they will have available for the community.
- 5) Negotiate what the big box stores will have for available for donations to the community.
- 6) Have a checklist of all known polluting facilities and when they will shut down and what will their timeline be for restarting back up.
- 7) Assess all local hazards, (i.e. chemical plants, oil lines) and have contacts on hand for authorities for notification and clean-up.
- 8) Have response guidelines on hand for contamination/ contact preventions.
- 9) Have State and federal advocacy teams prepared to reach out to governmental entities to communicate community needs and determine what their response timelines will be.

10) Make sure to take the time to identify all of the resources that responders will have and/or need to have at their disposal.

FOR CHURCHES THAT ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO PROVIDE SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE DISPLACED.

- 1) Have an established plan with other NGO'S of where to set up during/after a disaster and who is the primary contact person. This would include the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc.
- 2) Request that all donations be in the form of Gift Cards not old clothes.
- 3) Know which churches in the area have the disaster response teams and who the primary contact person is.

SERVICES FOR CHURCHES TO PROVIDE IN PREPARATION FOR DISASTERS

- 1) Designated Pastors and counselors for trauma
- 2) Set up communication lines- designate webpages, texts, mails, Facebook pages, etc.

SERVICES FOR CHURCHES TO PROVIDE IN THE EVENT OF A DISASTER

- 1) Prepare meals for emergency response workers and/or displaced persons.
- 2) Provide computers/ telephone to contact loved ones.
- 3) Provide charging stations for electronic devices.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

1) How to prepare for a possible evacuation

1. evacuation kits- copies of important documents, dry clothes, foot wear, medications, health insurance cards, vaccination records, cash, chargers for electronics, and others as needed
2. health equipment- identify an alternate source for emergency replacements and power supplies, spare oxygen canisters, C-PAP machine and distilled water for C-PAP.
3. plans on where to meet family members
4. medical records- especially for older people and those with underlying health conditions.
5. pet care and pet food
6. disabled care - emergency placement/ alternate care
7. Know the documents you would need for FEMA
8. Make sure you have a full gas tank in your auto.

2) In the case of an evacuation

1. Self-assess – Do I need to go to a hospital or a displacement center
2. Turn off utilities when possible -- natural gas (at the meter), electricity at the breaker box, propane shut-off valve, water main.
3. Grab your prepared evacuation kit.

3) How prepared are you for?

1. Indefinite hotel stays
2. pet care
3. disabled/dependant care

4) Post -Evacuation -- How To Prepare To Go Back

1. Dealing with the trauma
2. Getting Structures Inspected
3. Applying for insurance claims
4. Accessing water
5. Accessing healthcare
6. Contacting Utility companies to restore service
7. Making sure the utilities are safe to use -- testing water, no live downed power lines, no gas leaks, etc.
8. Making sure chemical / toxic facilities in the immediate area have stopped spewing/ leaking
9. Document replacement- Drivers License/ Social Security/ Vaccination Records/ Insurance records/Medical records.

COMMUNICATION TIPS AND RESOURCES

- 1) No one at each church has more than 10 contacts that they are responsible for.
- 2) Designate someone to post on webpages, texts, emails, Facebook, etc.
- 3) Emergency only communications in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
- 4) Be concise and avoid redundancy.

- 5) Do not overburden the person designated as your communicator.
- 6) Allow for questions to be sent directly to the communicator.

POST DISASTER COMMUNICATIONS

Provide a physical location, outside of locked doors, where people can have access to posted information.

1. Post information on where affected persons can get information and help.
2. Ideally someone should be present to provide aid and referrals.

Ideally, this location would be a place for NGO'S to set up – preferably it would be a large outdoor space like large parking lot for distribution of supplies as well as information.

There should be some availability of secured storage. This would be a secure outside area with minimum access.

PRE-PLANNING

Determine where your primary shelter will be. This will be where people know that they can go to get shelter or to drop off people needing shelter.

Determine ahead of time who will be responsible for food donations.

Determine who will be responsible for building materials donations.

Have a fundraising team in place and ready to do.

Plan for Cold storage for medications.

Plan for Charging stations for medical supplies

Plan for secure storage of Spare oxygen canisters.

Identify your multi-church clusters that will work together. Within each cluster,

1. Develop resources
2. Develop a communication plan
3. Design each cluster in manner that prevents people from having to travel further out of the way during times of hardship (no one central church for the entire city)

Sanctuary?

KNOWING YOUR NATIONAL AND REGIONAL DENOMINATIONAL RESOURCES

What resources does your denomination have for disaster response?

Who are the primary contact persons and how do I contact them?

Who have you designated to contact the disaster response coordinator in your denomination?

Does your denomination have a disaster relief warehouse, who is in charge, and how do we contact them?

MUTUAL AID

Fundraising response

1. Gift cards vs. Supplies – Gift cards are best for individuals while some building supplies may be appropriate for reconstruction.
2. If possible, have funds set aside to disaster response.

Evacuation- <https://climatecrisis.house.gov/one-pagers>