

Disaster Basics for Faith Communities

After a disaster, the needs of your congregants will grow dramatically. Usual boundaries of separate faith traditions will be blurred as the whole community seeks not only solace, but also concrete services. As a religious leader, responding to these complex issues in a truly meaningful and helpful way requires knowledge.

TIP SHEET

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Definition of a Disaster: Event that overwhelms a community's capacity to cope, requiring recovery assistance from both internal and external public and private sources.

The Roles of Religious Leaders in Disasters: Polls show that during times of crisis, a majority of Americans – nearly 60% – say they turn first to a religious leader for comfort and guidance.

Emergency Management refers to the organization, management, and coordination of resources dealing with all aspects of disasters. Each level of government has designated Emergency Management entities.

Disaster Lifecycle



Tip: Know All Your Hazards!

The preparations you make in general can be applied to any disaster. There are certain hazards, however, that will require special actions. Learn about these from your local Office of Emergency Management.

BASIC TERMS AND DEFINITIONS: PHASES OF THE DISASTER LIFECYCLE

Emergency Management is best viewed as a cycle of phases. Although activities in each phase can occur simultaneously, each phase informs the next. The phases are:

- **Mitigation** – Reducing or eliminating the future effects of all-hazards.
- **Preparedness** – Establishing authorities and responsibilities for emergency actions, and ensuring necessary resources are available and coordinated to respond effectively to all-hazards. Building disaster-resilient communities.
- **Response** – Saving lives, protecting property, and providing for public welfare during the period immediately before, during, and following a crisis or disaster.
- **Recovery** – Helping communities heal and return to a state of self-sufficiency or a state similar to pre-disaster conditions. Typically divided into short-term and long-term, recovery generally implies a return to economic, emotional, and spiritual self-reliance of individuals or families.

A COMMUNITY EFFORT

Emergency managers and public health officials team up with people as well as organizations in all parts of the community, including:

- Community and religious leaders
- Government agencies
- Non-profits with disaster-specific missions (VOADs)
- Businesses
- Social service, community-based, and faith-based organizations
- Individuals and families

Many religious leaders could have roles in all or most of the partner sectors listed above. In addition, interfaith networks take on a vast majority of the long-term, individual recovery coordination.

DISASTER DECLARATIONS

There are three main levels of disaster declaration, evacuation orders, or states of emergency, coinciding with city, state, and federal jurisdictions:

- **Mayoral** – A mayor can declare an evacuation or state-of-emergency for a city, and order the fire department, health department, police department and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) into action, and make requests for state help.
- **Gubernatorial** – A governor can declare an evacuation or state-of-emergency at the state level, and can activate the State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) and the State National Guard, as well as make requests for federal help.
- **Presidential** – The President can declare a federal disaster evacuation, public health emergency, or state-of-emergency, and can activate the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as well as mobilize any federal agency or National Guard unit in any state or the U.S. Military.

The majority of incidents are handled with local resources. Larger events require resources at state and federal levels. In order to access state and national resources during a disaster, local governments and non-profits must ask for assistance. Similarly, **each religious organization has its own protocols for requesting assistance.**



Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) help train people to respond to emergency situations in their communities. When emergencies happen, CERT members can give critical support to first responders, provide immediate assistance to victims, and organize spontaneous volunteers at a disaster site. CERT members can also help with non-emergency projects that help improve the safety of the community.

Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) coordinates the skills of practicing and retired physicians, nurses and other health professionals as well as other citizens interested in health issues, who are eager to volunteer to address their community's ongoing public health needs and to help their community during large-scale emergency situations.



Emergency Operations Center (EOC): Established by Emergency Management officials during large-scale disaster operations, an EOC is a central clearinghouse for information and resource sharing, and coordination. All government and private agencies with a major role are present.

IMPORTANT DISASTER PARTNERS FOR U.S. FAITH COMMUNITIES & THEIR LEADERS

Many of the entities below can provide training opportunities, guidance, and resources for your planning and response efforts. It is essential to establish communication links with these entities during disasters.

- **American Red Cross (ARC)** — Partnering with your local chapter will allow you to support your community during incidents that affect your neighborhood.
Visit www.redcross.org or call 1.877.REDCROSS.
- **Church World Service** — The relief, development, and refugee assistance ministry of 35 Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations in the United States, Church World Service provides highly regarded trainings and has staff that assist communities in responding to disasters and offers networking opportunities.
Visit www.churchworldservice.org or call 212.870.2061.
- **Citizen Corps Councils** — Funded by the federal government through FEMA, this nationwide network of state, local, and tribal Citizen Corps Councils builds on community strengths to implement preparedness programs and carry out a local strategy to involve government, community leaders, and citizens in all-hazards preparedness and resilience.
Visit <http://www.citizencorps.gov/councils/> to locate your nearest council
- **Disaster interfaiths or national faith-based recovery organizations** – Find out if your community or state has a disaster interfaith; and find out what your denomination or religious community does or expects you to do during disasters. Many interfaiths and national faith-based recovery organizations have disaster programs in which you can volunteer, and some may offer resources or training to your house of worship and others in affected areas.
Visit www.nvoad.org for links to member faith-based recovery organizations
Visit www.n-din.org for links to all national faith-based recovery organizations
Visit www.n-din.org to view the directory of all U.S. disaster interfaiths
+View the NDIN Tip Sheet “*National Faith-Based Disaster Service Organizations*”
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** – Currently under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), FEMA is organized by region. When FEMA is activated by the President in a disaster declaration, its operations are based on the National Response Plan (NRP).
Visit www.fema.gov or call 1.800.621.FEMA (3362).
- **FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaisons (VAL)** – FEMA assigns a VAL to each of the ten FEMA regional offices. Before, during, and after disasters, FEMA VALs foster cooperation between non-profit disaster partners and government, and also work closely with VOADs.
- **State Emergency Management Office (SEMO)** – Every state has an emergency management agency. To locate yours, google your state government agencies.
- **Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD)** – Each state has a VOAD, which is a local chapter of a national organization made up of the nation's leading response non-profits. The state VOAD's (plus local and regional VOAD's within some states) contribute to more effective response and less duplication in services through collaborating to coordinate and plan before disasters occur. VOAD engages members on various planning committees.
Visit www.nvoad.org and has excellent resources. And a link to each state VOAD
- **Your local community** – Building relationships with other religious leaders, social service organizations, businesses, and public safety personnel in your neighborhood will help you accomplish your everyday mission while providing a solid base for serving your community during disasters. A good start is to connect with your local disaster interfaith or VOAD—or to contact the community outreach officer in your local police, fire or health department.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **American Red Cross—Preparing to Get Training:** www.redcross.org
- **Church World Service—Community Arise Curriculum (Basic Disaster Ministry):** www.communityarise.com
- **National Disaster Interfaiths Network-Training & Tip Sheets for U.S. Religious Leaders :** www.n-din.org