

Disaster Response – Success Stories

Responding to Ice Storms in Rural North Dakota

A devastating ice storm and blizzard left more than 14,000 people without power on January 20, 2010, in the Episcopal Dioceses of North and South Dakota. The Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation that straddles the border between North and South Dakota is a sparsely populated, rural reservation that lies within one of the 10 poorest counties in the U.S. – they have a 69% unemployment rate.

According to the Rev. Canon Floberg, Canon for Multicultural and Central Area Ministries and Diocesan Disaster Coordinator for the Diocese of North Dakota, even though effects of the ice storm are hard to see, storms like these can cause considerable personal losses. Families can lose hundreds of dollars' worth of food stored in freezers, or spend thousands of dollars to heat their homes. Without heat, water pipes can freeze and burst, causing indoor floods. It is also hard to know who needs help. Floberg said,

“People are self reliant, they don’t think to ask for help and there are no organizations out there looking for people in trouble. So we [the Church] look for them.”

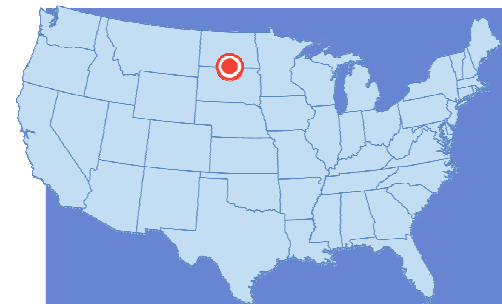
After the storm, Floberg knew the local Church would have to find and help the most vulnerable members of the community.

This storm was nothing new; congregations in the Diocese of North Dakota have suffered everything from heavy winter storms, to tornados and floods over the past several years. Because the poor local economy left most families with little margin, Floberg knew that many would need help beyond what was available from the government. The first thing Floberg did to find people who needed help was to get into his car. He knocked on doors to make sure families on the reservation were OK and ask them what they needed.

One need he found was for food. In rural areas, it’s common for families to slaughter a pig or cow to keep in the freezer to draw on during winter months. One man lost \$1,200 worth of meat when his freezer broke down from numerous power surges caused by ice build-up on power lines. With funds



The Rev. Canon John Floberg is Canon for Multicultural and Central Area Ministries and Diocesan Disaster Coordinator.



Fast Facts

DIOCESE:

Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota

DIOCESE SIZE:

Approx. 2,600 parishioners

LOCATION: North Dakota

POPULATION:

Approx. 640,000

DISASTER TYPE: Ice Storm

AFFECTED PEOPLE: 8,400

DISASTER RESPONSE:

Helping with propane distribution, food and utilities



from Episcopal Relief & Development, Floberg and the Diocese of North Dakota were able to help him replace his freezer and restock it for the rest of winter.

Many homes and businesses in communities like Floberg's are heated with propane. Not only is heat essential for the people inside, it also prevents water pipes from freezing and bursting. Trucks deliver propane, but propane tanks are usually off main roads at residences, and government plows don't clear private property. Floberg said, "When the propane guy says he can't get to your tank, you know you'll have a problem." With funds from Episcopal Relief & Development, the Diocese bought an industrial snowblower. Floberg and Deacon Brandon Mauai at Ft. Yates used the snowblower to clear paths ahead of propane trucks so they could reach homes. People would flag them down for help or if Floberg saw a home that needed clearing he would just do it. In this way he lessened the impact of the storm for many people.

In addition, a couple of weeks after the storm, Floberg contacted his local electric cooperative to find out who was still without power. Electric companies usually focus their recovery work on businesses and urban areas, leaving rural residents in the lurch. Even if people in areas outside urban centers own generators, paying for several weeks of high-priced diesel

isn't a possibility. With funds from Episcopal Relief & Development, the Diocese was able to help rural homeowners meet the unexpected costs of this storm – specifically fuel and heating costs. They also helped one man repair his trailer after it flooded due to a burst pipe.

Three months later, on Good Friday, another snow storm left 8,400 people in the area without electricity. The Diocese already had the snowblower and could continue helping with propane access. Floberg also worked to ensure the continuity of church business – he bought a generator to light the church for the funeral of a parishioner. Months later, with a United Thank Offering grant, the Diocese was purchased a commercial freezer, fridge and two stoves that run off the generator, and can now house and feed people in future disasters. Floberg said, "We hope don't we don't have to feed 100 people, but we're prepared if we need to."

By the Good Friday Storm, the Diocese of North Dakota had also established relationships that allowed them to respond to their community. They had an account at the local hardware store, and they knew their neighbors. More importantly, they knew how to find people that needed extra help. Recently, a man approached Floberg to thank him for the church's assistance. His family, for many reasons doesn't qualify for regular assistance through tribal and local agencies. He told Floberg, "No one can help us but you."

Lessons Learned



- Sometimes nothing beats going home-to-home to find out the real needs. For those in rural counties it means getting out of your office or church and into your vehicle to let people know resources are available. Ask residents if they know anyone who is falling through the cracks.
- People don't think to ask the church for help – they're usually surprised the church offers this kind of assistance. You have to go find the people that need you.
- Work with the local utility company to find out who may need extra help.
- Make sure the assistance you're providing doesn't conflict with other assistance families may have access to, so that they can receive all the help available.

Additional Resources



For more information on responding to winter storms, please see the following online resources.

- "Ice Storm in Kentucky"
- "How To: Windshield Assessment"
- "How To: Winter Shelters"

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