



Tips and Lessons — Running a Food Program After a Disaster

How To: Adapting a Parish Soup Kitchen After a Disaster

When Hurricane Sandy hit New York City on October 29, 2012, much of the city was paralyzed by power outages, flooding, halted transportation and spotty cell phone service. But that didn't stop Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in the city's Chelsea neighborhood from distributing thousands of sandwiches to a population that grew to about 2,000 guests a day immediately after the storm.

Power outages, supply issues and staffing concerns can all threaten a feeding ministry when a disaster strikes. At the same time, the immediate need for prepared meals can increase exponentially as displaced people struggle to buy food or make a meal in places such as shelters or hotel rooms.

Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen has been a ministry of Church of the Holy Apostles, an Episcopal parish in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, for more than 30 years. Michael Ottley, the soup kitchen's director of operations, and Yvonne Cassidy, the soup kitchen's development officer, suggests these tips for adapting a soup kitchen to the needs that arise after a disaster.

TIPS FOR A POST-DISASTER MEAL PROGRAM

Have a communication plan

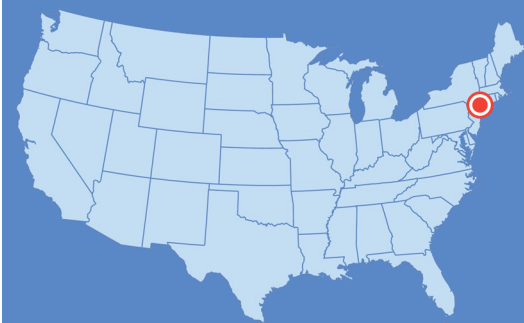
Anticipating that power would be out after the hurricane, Ottley texted his cooking staff before the storm, telling them to come in to work that week if it was safe and if they could make it. After the storm, with cell phone service spotty and email down, it was difficult to contact volunteers and supporters by the usual methods. Yvonne Cassidy, the soup kitchen's development officer, had been developing a Facebook and Twitter presence for the ministry for several months.



Biography



Michael Ottley is director of operations for Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in New York City. Yvonne Cassidy is the soup kitchen's development officer.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
Church of the Holy Apostles

CONGREGATION SIZE:
180 members

LOCATION:
New York, NY

AREA POPULATION:
8.2 million

DISASTER TYPE:
Hurricane

DISASTER RELIEF:
Soup kitchen



It paid off when she put out a call for donations of ready-made sandwiches on social media. Donations quickly came flooding in. That allowed the ministry to make it through the week without opening its refrigerators. None of its regular food items perished as a result, and when the power came back on, the soup kitchen was able to resume its hot meal program.

Talk through what-ifs ahead of time

At staff meetings, Ottley had often reviewed what to do in case of an emergency. Regular volunteers also know from past experience with disasters that the soup kitchen will do its best to stay open, so volunteers can simply show up if regular communication is down.

Recruit some volunteers who live nearby

Holy Apostles benefitted greatly from a group of long-term volunteers who live in the senior apartments next door. The group uses the ministry as a way to touch base with friends and to socialize, as well as volunteer, Ottley said. After the hurricane, their own building had power from internal generators, so residents were free to walk over to the soup kitchen to help make sandwiches and distribute food.

Be flexible about menus and serving location

“We know we’re going to serve a meal,” Ottley said. “It might not be the meal we planned to serve. We’ve got to adjust and serve what we have.” What they had included tuna fish and mayonnaise, bread and beverages, he said. Staff who could make it in arrived at their typical 6 am start time and made the sandwiches by candlelight. The ministry also had a strategy for changing where the food was served, switching to the outdoor food distribution that they typically employ on Good Friday, when the church building is in use.

Be able to grow with the need.

After the soup kitchen resumed its regular hot meal program, Ottley said it was able to meet the needs of new clients who began to use the program as a result of the effects of Hurricane Sandy. Many people who were displaced by the storm were resettled into hotels in the neighborhood. They added to the number of clients for about three months.

The soup kitchen was also well equipped to offer referral and counseling services to new clients who needed help after the storm. However, in this case, the demand wasn’t high, as people who were displaced were well supported by other sources, Ottley said.

Quick Communication Tips



- Should power go out, have at hand several ways to contact staff and volunteers, including cell phone numbers for calling and texting, email addresses and social media.
- Encourage volunteers and staff to connect to available social media such as Facebook and Twitter before a disaster strikes. These can be important sources for information sharing if cell phone service and e-mail are down.
- If you have warning before a disaster, contact staff and volunteers ahead of time to discuss the strategy for offering services after the storm, especially if communication might be limited in the future.

Additional Resources



For more information on similar topics, see the following online resources in our Resource Library.

(episcopalrelief.org/resource-library):

- “After Hurricane Sandy, Soup Kitchen Staff Make Sandwiches by Candlelight”
- “How To: Use Your Church to House Volunteer Groups”

For more information on Episcopal Relief & Development’s U.S. Disaster Program visit www.episcopalrelief.org.