

U.S. Disaster Program

Disaster Response – Follow in Their Footsteps



How To: Providing a Temporary Neighborhood Shelter

CASE STUDY

In the middle of winter in 2010, a fire destroyed two apartment buildings in a residential Yonkers, NY, neighborhood. When the Rev. Yamily Bass-Choate from San Andres Episcopal Church heard the commotion just a block from her parish, she went to see what was happening and how she could help. She found residents, many of them elderly, huddled on the street with nothing but the clothes they were wearing when they were evacuated, so she went back to the church and brought them the coats they had collected in a recent drive. Later she invited all of them back to the church to rest, warm up and have a bowl of soup provided by one of her parishioners. Seventy-five displaced residents spent three days and two nights at the church, returning to their charred apartments to salvage what they could and receiving help from government organizations. The church was able to provide shelter, food, clothes and comfort.

For Bass-Choate, the key component of preparedness that every church should discuss before an emergency is its mission. If the mission of your church is to be open to God's call to serve, then the church should always engage in times of trouble.

START A TEMPORARY SHELTER PROJECT

- **Be open to the opportunities to serve that are knocking at your door; try to serve with what you already have.** God will provide you with your mission and the means; it's a matter of being willing to respond. When we saw all those people huddled out on the street in the cold, the first thing I thought of doing was bringing them all those coats from the clothing drive the week before that were sitting in the church. My next thought was to bring residents in out of the cold, so I invited them to the church.



Biography



The Rev. Yamily Bass-Choate is rector at San Andres Episcopal Church in Yonkers, NY.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:

Iglesia San Andres

CONGREGATION SIZE:

75 members

LOCATION: Yonkers, New York

POPULATION: 196,086

DISASTER TYPE: Apartment fire

AFFECTED HOUSEHOLDS:

20-30

DISASTER RELIEF:

Temporary shelter for residents of two burned apartment buildings.

RECOVERY

- **Allow God to grant you the awareness of what people really need; don't go looking for a program.** You might create a program that has no real benefit. The program and who you should serve will come to you; listen to your community and allow yourself to listen to what God is telling you.
- **Your parish hall or even your church building can be an important asset that God has given you to do God's work.** You have to be willing to use what you've been given for those who need you. What's the worst that can happen? You are bringing people into the House of God. For the people from the burned buildings, the fact that they could stay close-by was key. They wanted to be able to see what was happening to their home and have access to it the moment the authorities said they could go in.
- **If you need more than what you can provide immediately, ask.** Amazingly, the transformative power of God will bring people to help you. Once we brought everyone back to the church, we asked for and received other things necessary for that night: cots and bedding from the American Red Cross, funds for underwear and socks from the diocese, food and cooked meals from parishioners, donated goods like clothing and towels from other members of the community.
- **Rely on and ask your congregation for help.** With prayer and trust they will help you. Even without a lot of financial resources, anyone can help. All I had to do was call one or two key parishioners and they spread the word that we had guests at the church. Soon after we had volunteers cooking soup and trying to make our guests comfortable. The youth group came to play with children and clean the two small bathrooms every half hour. An involved congregation will always be able to help with logistics and manpower – for example, I didn't have to sleep at the church during this time. There was always at least one parishioner willing to stay to help people with anything they may need during the night.
- **There is a simple activity that any church can do in a moment of emergency – supply space for all the agencies and organizations providing help; make them accessible to those that need them.** The day after the fire, the different organizations providing help like the American Red Cross and Housing Department asked if they could come to the church so that they could start the paperwork and other processes necessary to get residents temporary housing, etc. All the church had to do was clear the cots and set up tables and chairs so that representatives from each organization had a place they could speak to building residents.
- **There are going to be certain situations when you won't be able to provide.** It's ok to say "no" and try to find other solutions. When the people came to the church, there just wasn't enough space for them and their pets. We created a temporary space for pets outside until other temporary homes that accepted animals could be found for them.

Remember:



None of this is our doing. We need to trust that God will supply us with a mission and what we need to accomplish it. No one can respond on their own – it must be empowered by the One who has commissioned you and the Church to do this work: God. God will allow us to be present and call us into action when we least expect it, and it takes willingness to respond when you are called.

When God gives you the opportunity to serve, you can't help but be transformed both as a person and as a church. Be open to that opportunity. It's wonderful the way your life changes when you're given the chance to respond. God is giving you a gift by allowing you to have that experience – you need to be open to it and do what you can with what you have.

Additional Resources



For more information on providing temporary shelter please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Winter Shelters"

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