

US DISASTER PROGRAM

Ministering to Homeless Communities after Disaster



Disaster Response Tips and Lessons

RELATIONSHIP IS EVERYTHING

At Common Cathedral in Longmont, CO, a special congregation of the Diocese of Colorado, the members include some of the city's most vulnerable residents -- people who live part or all of the year on the streets as a result of extreme poverty or the instabilities of mental illness or addiction.

Yet when unprecedented rain and flooding besieged Longmont and the rest of Colorado's front range in September of 2013, not one member of the congregation's homeless population was lost. All were accounted for. And by the next Friday's liturgy, many were receiving the sleeping bags, tarps, tents and supplies they needed to reestablish their camps. There is no permanent homeless shelter in Longmont.

Chris Sandoval and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty, leaders of Common Cathedral, say the relationships and trust forged in their unique faith community were key in finding their most vulnerable members and getting supplies to them after the storm.

They offer several insights on working with homeless people before, during and after a disaster.

BUILD TRUST BEFORE A DISASTER

"For people on the margins, relationship is everything," said Genty, who is a deacon in the Diocese of Colorado. "The time to build relationships is not during a crisis. It's now. So when the crisis happens it's not the perceived 'haves' swooping in to pull out the perceived 'have-nots.'"

Shared liturgy is one way to develop those relationships, said Sandoval, who is Common Cathedral's unordained "pastor". He recommends regularly attending a church service or outreach that serves homeless people to get to know them over time. During a disaster, he said, "if you don't have their trust, they won't look at you."

SHARE RESOURCES AT LITURGY

Common Cathedral's weekly service is also an opportunity to check



AUTHOR

Chris Sandoval (right) and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty lead the Common Cathedral, a Jubilee ministry and a special congregation of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado.

FAST FACTS

CONGREGATION

Common Cathedral

CONGREGATION SIZE

30 to 70 members

LOCATION

Longmont, CO

DISASTER

Flood

RESPONSE

Serving homeless members

in with homeless members and to distribute supplies. Throughout the week, Sandoval visits with members of the homeless community and tells newcomers about the congregation. In the evenings he distributes supplies as he walks the streets.

“It’s so special that on a Friday night I can get to a few people who I don’t get to see (during the week),” Sandoval said. “They hear the Word, and they get a meal. It’s so important to me to make sure the ones on the street get to eat a hot meal. And I know they’re not getting into trouble that hour.”

SURVIVAL SUPPLIES ARE NEEDED ALL THE TIME

“The folks who live on the streets in general have to transport all of their worldly possessions with them wherever they go” Genty said. “So imagine what that would mean if you or I had to do that. Additionally, access to things like electricity, hot water, batteries, etc. is usually very difficult and hard to find”.

The following supplies are essential to surviving on the streets, whether there is a disaster or not:

- Wool socks (not cotton). Always needed. Critical to survival on the streets.
- Lightweight one-to-two person sized tarps.
- Sleeping bags.
- Rope.
- Food like you would take with you on a backpacking trip that is easy to carry and easy to prepare without much of anything in the way of utilities.
- Notes, cards, and letters with words of encouragement and comfort.

ALERT THE HOMELESS POPULATION TO UPCOMING CRISES

People on the streets have little access to media announcements of upcoming weather events, and can miss out on vital information about evacuations, shelters and food distribution. To make sure the word gets out, Genty said he maintains a network of contacts among sheltering organizations. And as a employee of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, he is tuned in to weather news.

If he hears that severe weather is headed their way, Genty said he lets Sandoval know so that he can get word out when he is making his rounds. At the start of the Common Cathedral service they also announce any upcoming weather events and alert participants to whether shelters will be open.

USE NETWORKS TO ACCOUNT FOR MEMBERS

ABOUT COMMON CATHEDRAL IN LONGMONT

Modeled after a similar program in Boston, Longmont’s Common Cathedral was developed to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of people on the streets, said The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty, who helped found the ministry in 2008. It has no office or dedicated building. Liturgy is held every Friday in a local park, regardless of the weather or temperature. Anywhere from 30 to 70 people attend the weekly service. Most are homeless, but other members are from the more affluent “housed population” and some travel in from the suburbs, Genty said.

The liturgy is non-traditional, designed to appeal to people who are churched and unchurched alike. The group sings, shares prayer and reads a passage of Scripture, which they discuss.

“You get to hear how these stories that are so familiar to us sound to people on the streets,” Genty said.

If a priest is present, they share consecrated bread. The service closes with a hot meal provided by one of several local churches that support the ministry.

The homeless community often gathers in small groups of five or six people, forming “families” for protection and support, Sandoval said. After the flood, he used his knowledge of this network to find out how they had fared after the flood. One group would report on the safety of others. It took a day and a half of personal visits and conversations, but he was able to establish that no one had been lost in the storm.

Genty said it would have been helpful to have a system in place to receive information on their homeless members sooner, which is difficult when there are no numbers to call or addresses to check. Common Cathedral is considering offering its homeless members identification cards or tags that ask responders to contact Common Cathedral leaders if a member is incapacitated or hospitalized. “The homeless have no family,” he said. “There isn’t an opportunity to be there for them.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

View a video on Common Cathedral at vimeo.com/21069968.

For more best practices see the following online resources at www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary:

Success Stories: Assisting the Homeless After a Flood

How To: Building Relationships for Response | New Orleans, LA

How To: Winter Shelters | VA

Learn more about the US Disaster Program at www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster