

Tips & Lessons – Working with Donations After a Disaster

Tips & Lessons – Disaster Response

After Hurricane Sandy struck in 2012, flood waters and wind destroyed homes and businesses along the eastern seaboard. Extensive media coverage of the superstorm’s damage touched the hearts of people around the world, prompting them to donate to recovery efforts.

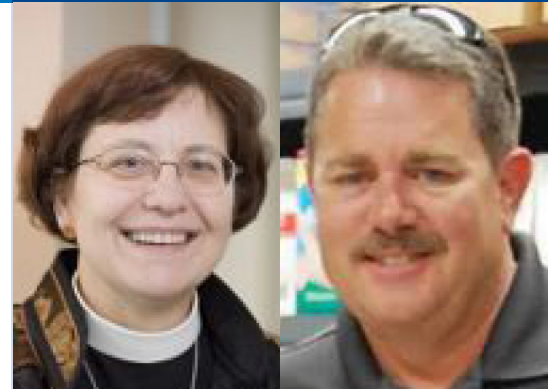
In Tuckerton, New Jersey, members of Church of the Holy Spirit sprang into action to help people in their town who had sustained storm damage. A major part of the church’s recovery experience was working with donations in order to effectively meet the needs of their community. In this piece, The Rev. Martha McKee, Vicar at Holy Spirit, and Keith Adams, Recovery Coordinator for the Diocese of New Jersey, reflect on their experience working with donations after a disaster.

CASE STUDY

When Church of the Holy Spirit’s congregants became aware that their neighbors in Tuckerton, NJ, had suffered Hurricane Sandy damage, they quickly gathered to make sandwiches for volunteers who cleared debris. Throughout the recovery period, our church helped with hosting community meals and distributing lunches throughout the area, and I began to coordinate with the ecumenical council to identify unmet needs in the community. It wasn’t long after the storm’s landfall, however, when we started to receive calls from friends and colleagues asking how they could help. Offers ranged from volunteering to rebuild houses, which we were not ready for, to donating clothing and household goods, for which we had no need or capacity to manage. Fortunately, as we moved through the recovery process, we gradually learned how to better manage post-disaster donations.

MANAGING THE DISASTER AFTER THE DISASTER

Motivated by a genuine desire to help and provide comfort for storm victims, donors sent items ranging from cash to essential clean-up supplies. In-kind donations, or donations of physical goods, came pouring in from across the country after the storm. Unfortunately, some used the disaster as an opportunity to empty their closets and pantries. Interspersed among the critical donations, there were also soiled clothes and expired



BIOGRAPHY

The Rev. Martha McKee is Vicar at Church of the Holy Spirit, Tuckerton, NJ, and Keith Adams is the Disaster Recovery Coordinator for the Diocese of New Jersey.

FAST FACTS

CONGREGATION:
Church of the Holy Spirit

LOCATION:
Tuckerton, New Jersey

POPULATION:
3,378

CONGREGATION SIZE:
200

DISASTER RESPONSE:
Donation management after
Hurricane Sandy

canned foods that were just unusable. The sheer volume of goods was overwhelming.

After donations arrived, local recovery volunteers (including many who had also experienced storm damage themselves) were faced with the monumental logistical challenge of sorting, storing and distributing serviceable goods to those in need. This diverted valuable energy away from addressing the community's immediate needs for feeding and sheltering survivors, and assisting them with debris removal.

At Church of the Holy Spirit, we had several folks from out of the area with trucks full of items spontaneously show up and ask if they could store their goods on our property. Given our limited space and resources to manage the donations, and that there was not a demonstrated need for the items, we declined.

Although it was difficult to turn away assistance, it was essential for us to follow the principle that the needs and requirements of the community would determine the kinds of help that we accepted.

We also received a call from a congregation in a diocese several states away who wanted to donate teddy bears to storm survivors. They remembered the help that folks in New Jersey had given them in a previous disaster and wanted to reciprocate. We were really grateful for this expression of compassion, but we realized that teddy bears were not an urgent need in Tuckerton or elsewhere in New Jersey. However, we needed food assistance for those displaced into hotel rooms with no cooking facilities. In conversation with our colleagues in the other diocese, we agreed that the teddy bears would be comforting, and we asked if they would include gift cards that could be used at local restaurants.

Several days later, we received over one hundred bears all hugging a gift card! Not only did the bears provide emotional comfort for displaced children, but the gift cards helped address storm survivor's physical requirements. Moreover, because the gift cards were used at local stores, the donation helped promote economic recovery in disaster-affected area.

In-kind donations are often called "the disaster after the disaster" because they can be so unwieldy to manage. During recovery, we learned that community requirements must drive giving and that honest conversation about those needs can lead to vital aid.

TIPS FOR THOSE IN IMPACTED AREAS ON WORKING WITH DONORS

- Access to financial resources is very helpful in the early stages of a disaster. Consider encouraging potential donors to contribute cash and gift certificates, and remind potential



The Rt. Rev. George Councill, former Diocesan Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey, poses with a donated teddy bear holding a gift card.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on helping during times of disaster, see the following resources:

- [Volunteering & Donation Advice from FEMA](http://www.fema.gov/volunteer-donate-responsibly)
<http://www.fema.gov/volunteer-donate-responsibly>
- [Helping During Time of Disasters](#)
- [How To: Volunteer Orientation](#)
- [Volunteer Curriculum: Ready to Serve with Compassion](#)
- [Thanks, But No Thanks: When Disaster Donations Overwhelm All Things Considered Report.](#)
- [Comprehensive Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations](#)

Learn more about disaster preparedness and response by visiting episcopalrelief.org.

donors that financial contributions and gift cards allow disaster survivors to make personal choices, which affirms their agency and control.

- In times of disaster, your local economy will be affected. Gift cards enable survivors to “buy local,” helping both themselves and your community recover.
- Don’t forget to write the dollar amount on the gift cards in permanent marker. At times, we would walk around with a handful of identical gift cards, but we had no idea how what amount was loaded on each card.
- Connect with your local VOAD or COAD (Voluntary or Community Organizations Active in Disaster). These organizations respond to disasters and may already have a procedure in place for donations and volunteer management that you can tap into.
- If you ask for particular donations, specify how long you think it will be needed and be honest about your timeline. You don’t want to receive clean-up supplies after the recovery process has moved to rebuilding!
- Be honest about what is needed and your ability to manage donations. It is more than okay to say “no” to accepting donations at your church. Your congregation will need to use the space also to worship and hold regular meetings. You are responsible for the needs in your community, not the desires of well-meaning donors. Of course you want to be kind, but don’t feel obligated to accept donations to make the giver feel good. Remember, donor desire to help doesn’t define recovery needs, and in fact, it could divert essential resources from relief and recovery.