

How To: Host a Respite Space for Young Families

Disaster Response – Tips and Lessons

CASE STUDY

The 2014-2015 winter in Massachusetts was incredibly harsh. In just a few short weeks, a series of blizzards left Boston covered in a record-breaking 110" of snow, leading local officials to declare states of emergency across New England. Reports came in from all across the state of collapsed roofs, power outages, and other structural damages. Public transportation systems across the state were shut down and roads were closed, preventing travel and keeping many workers from getting to work. The effects of the snow were even more pronounced among more vulnerable populations, such as low-wage workers and the elderly. Beyond the building damage, road closures and interrupted transportation, the inclement weather also led to an increase in mental health challenges, and many experienced a sense of isolation while confined to their homes.

In particular, children's routines were disrupted. There were nine weather-related school closures in a row, leading to stir-crazy kids and stressed-out parents being cooped up inside for days on end.

Rev. Sara Irwin, who has two young children of her own, noticed this restlessness in her home and decided to open up her congregation, Christ Church, Waltham, to provide a space for members of her church to bring their children to play. Over one snowy afternoon, between 15 and 20 people gathered together to play and to weather the incredible snow together. The kids in her congregation were able to burn energy and play with their friends, and the adults were able to connect with one another and relax for the first time in days. A parishioner with leftovers from a party donated food for the day, and others donated their time to make the event happen.



BIOGRAPHY

The Rev. Sara Irwin is rector of Christ Church in Waltham, Massachusetts.

FAST FACTS

CONGREGATION:
Christ Church Waltham

MEMBERS:
125 Members

LOCATION:
Waltham, MA

POPULATION:
62,000

DISASTER TYPE:
Record-breaking snowfall

DISASTER RELIEF:
Respite space for young families

GETTING STARTED:

1. ASSESS NEEDS

- Think about what needs are being unmet in your community during a disaster. Often, our first response is to think too big and get overwhelmed. Instead, focus on what you can realistically accomplish that meets a need of those around you. Respond in an appropriate way and be in your community. In our case, we saw a need for respite space for children, and responded by opening up the church for playtime.

2. ASSESS YOUR ASSETS

- Think about what your congregation has that could be useful. Do you have a large space for kids to run around? Do you have empty classrooms? Is there an industrial kitchen? What about people – what gifts do members of your congregation have that could be useful?

3. PUT THE WORD OUT

- Float the idea among your networks. Christ Church communicates regularly via email and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, so parishioners are accustomed to receiving information that way. The congregation is also accustomed to receiving text communications. During the storms, Christ Church also used a pre-existing email list and phone numbers to reach out to members of the congregation who may not have seen the information on social media. Once it seems like there is enough interest, use those networks to announce when and where you will be having the respite center.

4. MAKE IT REPLICABLE

- Because I put the idea on Facebook and Twitter, other clergy were able to pick up on the idea and replicate it within their own parishes. I also recommend making an announcement in .jpg form (i.e., an image file) that can be “shared” easily on social media rather than in text form to reach more people and facilitate sharing.

5. ASK YOUR COMMUNITY FOR SUPPORT

- I also asked for donations and support via social media. Members who were not able to attend the training still wished to help with the effort. Many shared the event via their personal social media pages, which helped reach more people in the community. A parishioner who had extra food from a party earlier that week was able to donate the leftovers to feed people. Because transportation was limited due to the snowy conditions, others helped organize rides and clear the sidewalks to facilitate getting people to the space.

TIPS FOR LAUNCHING A POST-DISASTER RESPITE CENTER:

- Make spreading news easy. A .jpg virtual flyer can be shared easily on social media.
- Ask your community for support and donations such as food.
- Keep extra supplies such as board games, crafts and juice boxes on hand.
- Maintain a spirit of openness.
- Adjust services if needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on creating respite space, please see the following online resources:

“Success Stories: Creating Respite Space in a Winter Storm”

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