



Tips and Lessons – Disaster Communications

Setting Up Communications During Disasters

CASE STUDY

Tracie Middleton is a deacon and fire-chaplain for the Diocese of Texas near Beaumont, a town of about 111,000 people two hours east of Houston on the Gulf Coast. After Hurricane Katrina, Beaumont received evacuees from Louisiana and Mississippi. Unfortunately, soon after Katrina, Beaumont suffered extensive damage when it was hit by Hurricane Rita. Then the city had to take care of both its own population and those who had fled there after the previous storm. Middleton began as a volunteer with The Salvation Army, and then was hired as the public relations representative for the organization as it worked to respond both to the evacuees and local residents affected by the hurricane.

DISASTER PUBLIC RELATIONS

Partnerships

- **Make phone/fax/email lists ahead of time.** Set up distribution lists before a disaster with up-to-date information. When a disaster strikes, there won't be time to compile these lists and still get your message out quickly and effectively. Include contacts to notify about relief services; think about the media, government agencies, the diocese, and local ecumenical partners. The when you're ready, you can blast information out immediately.
- **Know exactly who you should speak to.** Make sure that when you call the media or an organization, the information you provide is relevant to the person you're speaking to. Remember: a receptionist may take a message, but you can't be sure it will make it to the right person.
- **Visit in person.** If people know your face and affiliation, they'll be more inclined to help you.



Biography

Tracie Middleton is a deacon and fire-chaplain. She directed communications for The Salvation Army in Beaumont, TX after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.



Fast Facts

DIOCESE:
Episcopal Diocese of Texas

DIOCESE SIZE:
Approx. 80,000 members

LOCATION: Beaumont, Texas
POPULATION: Approx. 111,000

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane

DISASTER RELIEF:
Public relations and logistics for
sheltering and feeding programs



- **Make sure you have / develop good relationships with local radio and TV stations.** They are a central hub for information and can help you coordinate with others. Cultivate these relationships with regular personal visits. Already knowing your local media will help immensely in a disaster. You'll know exactly who to speak with, making it easier to deliver your information.
 - An established relationship may allow you to offer pastoral care. Members of the media experience stress in disasters and need support, too.
- **By communicating in person you can learn different things.** People may not mention an issue at the forefront of their mind because they assume it's obvious and you know about it too. You can find out about these issues through direct conversation, off-hand remarks, etc.
- **Talk to a variety of people.** Individuals tend to focus on a variety of things, particularly under stress. Speaking to many people helps you to get more and different information regularly, and build a more complete picture.
- **Get outside.** I established a route of people to visit each day. I would get in my car to visit the different Salvation Army feeding sites, and would talk to people using the services to find out what they needed most – specifically what information they needed, and the easiest ways for them to access that information. I also visited all local media organizations, which helped open up regular lines of communication. As I visited more people, my information got better and information about our services reached more people.
- **Use your website.** Make some response to the disaster on your website as soon as possible. Most importantly, keep your website updated during a disaster response, and include the address in all your communications. If you don't have a website yet, make it part of your disaster preparation plan!

Internet Communications

- **Have a website ready to go.** It was hard to set up the site during the chaos of response. After the immediate disaster, the site can then be used for other disaster-related issues like preparedness, etc.
- **Update the website regularly.** Send people to the site when they call with questions. After a disaster many people want to donate both goods and their time – use the site to give instructions on what is needed and what isn't, how people can help and where to go.
- **Have a short and easy web address.** It's easier for people to remember.
- **Make cards with the web address on them that are easy to hand out.** These cards are important because people can navigate easily to the site and access up-to-date information – making information dissemination timelier.
- **Create a blog.** Blogs can be a good communication option for a long-term response. Blogs allow you to give regular updates, and Blogger now has a feature that allows for static pages to also keep basic information.

Logistics:



- Volunteer coordination can be a challenge – it's often difficult to find useful things for them to do. Use your website and communications outlets to let people know if and when they are needed.
- Try to have a central site for all services. Transportation will be difficult; don't make impacted people go to many locations.
- Decentralizing operations within that central site is also important. People affected by disaster are under a great degree of stress, especially in the immediate aftermath, and the trick is not to have one large line that they have to stand in to get all their services at once. People feel better if they can complete one small task at a time; they feel they're making progress rather than just waiting.

Additional Resources



For more information on logistical considerations during and after a disaster, please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Volunteer Orientation"

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