



## Tips & Lessons— Coordinating Donations

# Using your Church as a Donations Depot

In December 2007, as record-high floodwaters in southwest Washington began to recede, it became clear that the needs of those affected would quickly overwhelm the ability of any one organization to respond. FEMA recorded over 10,000 applications for assistance across 10 counties, eventually resulting in almost \$18 million of federal assistance to families and individuals. Hundreds of homes were uninhabitable, and many found themselves in shelters or staying with friends. Many had only what they had escaped with as the water rose.

The sudden disaster was such a major news event in our area that hundreds of organizations and thousands of people responded on their own. Our church, St. John's in Olympia, was not affected by the floods, but we were located close to communities who were, and we had unused space. This meant we were in a prime location to get involved. In addition, several members of our congregation had been involved in recovery efforts after Katrina and were eager to help. In the first few days after the floods, we noticed that people wanted to make donations, but it was hard to figure out what was needed and where it should be delivered. With this in mind, we decided that our congregation could meet this need of the greater community by using our church as a drop-off center for donated supplies. Once we had decided what our church could do, a call for help went out to congregations across the diocese and to individuals on St. John's email list. Donations began to roll in. It soon became apparent that we needed a system to organize and transport these donations, as well as someplace to take them for distribution. From this, we learned some important lessons that we hope you can use, should you find yourself in a similar situation.

## TIPS FOR SETTING UP YOUR OWN DEPOT:

### Let People Know What You Need

When you send out a call for supplies, **be clear about what is needed and what is not needed.** I can't emphasize this point enough! Take care not to create what's commonly called the "disaster after the disaster." This is what



### Biography



Mindy Chambers is currently a member of St. Benedict's in Lacey, Washington.



### Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Olympia, WA  
CONGREGATION SIZE: 500  
LOCATION: Olympia, Washington  
POPULATION: 46,000  
DISASTER TYPE: Flooding  
DATE: December 2007  
DISASTER RELIEF:  
Donation Distribution Depot



happens when well-meaning community members donate items that can't be used in the near future or sometimes not at all, like furniture for people who no longer have a home, or clothing that is inappropriate to the season or location. Be ready to supply donors with alternatives drop-off sites for those other donations so they won't feel as if their contributions are unneeded. Get the word out using social media, parish email lists, your website, Sunday bulletins, announcements, and finally good old fashioned word of mouth to reach a wide range of folks, from youth to retirees.

### Get Specific

Request cash donations to be used to purchase supplies as needs are identified. Gift cards are wonderful when selected wisely—in the first few days, cards should be for stores that sell groceries and personal items. Later, once you know what is needed, you can request cards to hardware and furniture stores. From our experience, other needed items may include water, diapers and baby wipes, toiletries, pet food, pet carriers, rubber boots and sleeping bags. Un-needed (but often donated) items include used clothing (with the exception being outerwear, such as coats and hats and gloves), used stuffed animals/children's toys, and furniture.

### Stay Organized

Designate specific places in your church building for specific supplies. Our church taped off spaces in its parish hall for cleaning supplies, food, personal hygiene supplies, blankets and sleeping bags, etc. This helped keep the donation area organized, so that items could be easily found. Have someone present when donations come in so you can be sure they are placed in the correct area.

### Connect with Emergency Management

Set up contacts with state, county and local emergency management officials prior to a disaster. They will be able to provide vital information on what is needed and where to take those items, if you don't have a distribution site or sites arranged in advance.

### Contact Community Groups

Set up contacts with other faith communities and non-profits. They are often the first people on the ground and can quickly assess needs and determine safe drop-off points for supplies. During our response, we were blessed to work with a well-established community non-profit in a dry, central location in the affected area. While it had a food bank and fresh water distribution center, it was struggling to keep up with other needs. That is where we could help.

### Know When You Are Done!

We were fortunate not to have many left over items once our final delivery had been made. Four weeks after the disaster, we began to hear that immediate needs had been taken care of and we brought our depot to a close and transitioned our energy into setting up a long-term recovery efforts with faith communities, non-profits and government officials.

### Lessons Learned:



- **Communicate with Partners:** Know where you will be delivering your donations for distribution, and set up a time for drop off. Don't just show up at a disaster site and expect to be accommodated. Folks there are already scrambling to get multiple jobs done and won't always have time to stop to unload what you bring.
- **Be Flexible:** Designate someone to keep tabs on the rapidly changing needs of the affected community. What is needed on the first day is radically different than what is needed two weeks in.
- **Think Ahead:** Line up folks with pickup trucks and trailers to transport items ahead of time, so you are ready to make deliveries.

### Additional Resources



For more information on post-disaster programs, please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Volunteer Orientation"
- "10 Tips for Responding to a Disaster in Your Community"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at [www.episcopalrelief.org](http://www.episcopalrelief.org)