

U.S. Disaster Program

Tips & Lessons: Advocacy

Include advocacy for vulnerable people in disaster response

For congregations in the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey, responding to the needs of vulnerable people affected by Hurricane Sandy has meant a long-term commitment to rebuilding homes, bolstering feeding programs, providing case management and connecting people to services.

But it doesn't end there. The diocese also advocates for government policies and programs that ensure vulnerable people make a full and sustained recovery.

"When we're talking about social transformation and relationships, this is how we're relevant to the community," said Keith Adams, disaster recovery coordinator for the diocese.

For example, when the State of New Jersey asked for public comment about how it would distribute federal community block grant money to assist storm survivors, the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey spoke up.

Under the original proposal, 70 percent of the funds would go to supporting homeowners and only 30 percent would assist renters. But in reality, Adams said, renters make up more than half of the people affected by the hurricane, and they often have fewer supports to recover after a disaster. Diocesan officials joined more than 100 other organizations in signing on to a position letter that called for the funding to be distributed more equitably. The state ultimately dedicated 40 percent of the funds to assisting renters.

Adams suggests several ways that congregations and dioceses can weave advocacy efforts into disaster response.

ADVOCACY TIPS

Mobilize your social media network

Effective advocacy is a multi-pronged effort that requires the voices of individual constituents, as well as the involvement of bishops and other diocesan leaders. As Hurricane Sandy's impact on already vulnerable people became more and more apparent, the diocese encouraged members to call their legislators about increasing funding for affordable housing and upping New Jersey's minimum wage.



Biography

Keith Adams is the disaster recovery coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey.



Fast Facts



DIOCESE:
Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey

DIOCESAN POPULATION:
47,092 baptized members

LOCATION:
The southern two-thirds of the State of New Jersey.

DISASTER:
Hurricane Sandy

RESPONSE:
Advocacy, home rebuilding, case management, feeding programs.



Adams said that he used the diocesan Facebook page, as well as e-mail and Twitter to send alert congregations to upcoming legislation.

“Whatever you use as a diocese to talk to people ... that same network can be used to advocate on these issues and to motivate people,” he said.

Get diocesan leadership on board

Even before Hurricane Sandy hit, the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey already had a long history of advocacy, Adams said, with the bishop taking the lead. As a diocesan-wide effort, advocacy issues can be coordinated, strategized and networked, so that individual voices are amplified and strengthened.

Network with groups that serve vulnerable people

The diocese worked with an affordable housing group to advocate for the change to the community block funding and to include the construction of more affordable housing in post-Sandy rebuilding efforts.

“Because we were already a part of the affordable housing group and were advocating for that population, it was immediately on our radar,” Adams said.

Connecting with organizations such as diocesan jubilee networks and VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) committees also helps to alert advocates to issues more quickly.

Engage politically-connected church members

Episcopal congregations may be very politically connected, especially when they can count elected officials, legislative staff members, labor union representatives or issue advocates among their members. Congregants who are politically involved can be important assets in the advocacy work that accompanies disaster response.

Monitor the news to learn about advocacy opportunities

There are numerous opportunities throughout the life cycle of a disaster to advocate for policies and programs that better serve vulnerable people, from advocating for assistance immediately after a disaster to weighing in on zoning changes down the road. As the media cover post-disaster programs or legislation that impacts recovery, pay attention to how these efforts are affecting vulnerable people.

Educate church members on the root causes of vulnerability

As congregations take on response efforts, such as expanding food programs or hosting volunteers, members often become far more aware of the personal stories of vulnerable people. People begin to see the wider issues at play. Disasters can be a catalyst for the Church to engage more widely on the root causes of poverty and injustice.

“People have a tendency to compartmentalize disasters,” Adams said. “But the issue of how we are trying to get justice for people who can’t get justice for themselves, that’s a 365-day job for the Church.”

More tips for engaging congregations in advocacy

- Raise awareness among church members by holding adult forums on the root causes of poverty and vulnerability. After a disaster, invite groups that serve vulnerable people to explain specific impacts and describe advocacy opportunities.
- Form an advocacy network of people willing to make calls or send e-mails to elected officials when legislation that impacts the vulnerable is being developed, discussed and voted upon. Such a network can be as simple as a targeted e-mail list.
- When it’s time for constituents to weigh in on issues, send out simple talking points that make the advocacy message clear and easy to share.
- Include the specific needs of vulnerable people impacted by disaster in the Prayers of the People. For example, rather than offering general prayers for those affected, mention the need for affordable housing, employment opportunities, and sufficient recovery assistance.

Additional Resources



For more information on similar topics see the following online resources at www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary:

How To: Building Relationships for Response | LA

For more information on the US Disaster Program visit:

www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster