

U.S. Disaster Program

Disaster Response – Success Stories

Recognizing the needs and gifts of the homeless after Colorado floods

When Colorado's Front Range was besieged with unprecedented rainfall and flooding over a 200-mile area in September of 2013, eight people lost their lives and more than 2,000 homes were destroyed. In Longmont, a city about 15 miles from Boulder, the homeless population that camps along the St. Vrain River lost not only their possessions but the very ground they lived on as the river bank was swept away.

Many of them were members of Common Cathedral, a congregation of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado that is mostly comprised of people who live on the streets. After the flood, the congregation's leaders worked with the network of homeless people in the community to track down members and determine their needs.

Despite the severity of the flood, none of the congregation's homeless members were lost, said The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty, who helped found the ministry in 2008.

Every Friday night anywhere from 30 to 70 people attend Common Cathedral's open-air liturgy and hot meal in Collyer Park in Longmont. Most live on the streets, though some have homes and drive in to attend.

Each service begins with the statement: "We are a community of faith, a community of fellowship, a community of equals, and a community of friends," Genty said.

The strength of that community was key in locating Common Cathedral's most vulnerable members after the storm. Chris Sandoval, one of Common Cathedral's leaders, hit the streets to find them.

"When you're on the streets and homeless, you're a family," said Sandoval, who was himself homeless in Longmont for seven years. "Everyone takes care of the group they're in. Sometimes there are six or seven in a group, staying together. Everybody knows where everybody down there lives."

Sandoval located several homeless members, who in turn reported on the safety of others. It took a day and a half to learn that everyone had made it to safety. No lives were lost. The rain had fallen for several days, giving people time to make it to drier places.

"They managed this incredibly well because it was something they were used to doing," Genty said. "They are used to losing their homes time and again and rebuilding. A flood is not that much different from police raiding their sites."



Biography

Chris Sandoval (right) and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty lead the Common Cathedral, which the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado designates a "special congregation" because of its unique ministry.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION
Common Cathedral

CONGREGATION SIZE
Fluctuates with attendance, which can range from 30 to 70. About twelve core members attend regularly.

LOCATION
Longmont, CO

DISASTER
Flood

RESPONSE
Locating and assisting homeless people after a flood



Still, for those that lived in the green way along the St. Vrain, the flood took everything. Other congregation members with houses faced substantial losses, as well. One formerly homeless couple had recently married and had managed to leave the streets and move into a trailer, Genty said. It caught fire during the flood and was destroyed.

The Friday after the flood, about 30 people attended the Common Cathedral liturgy at Collyer Park. Sandoval distributed new sleeping bags, tents and rope funded by the Diocese of Colorado and Episcopal Relief & Development.

Donations poured in from other Episcopal congregations as well.

"It really helped us feel that we were not alone, that our little community of faith was part of something much larger, and there was great comfort in that," Genty said. Inquiries about how the members of Common Cathedral are doing are still coming in, he said, and people are still offering assistance.

"The bigger challenge is finding places to rebuild, places to hole up," Genty said.

Living on the streets is illegal in Longmont. The nearest permanent shelter is in Boulder, 15 miles and three bus transfers away. In Longmont, a network of churches provides a rotating homeless shelter October through April. They opened a month early in response to the storm.

But many of the resources for those displaced by a disaster aren't always available to people without permanent addresses, Sandoval pointed out. Groups that work with the homeless have reported instances of people being turned away from disaster services because they didn't have addresses, according to the

National Health Care for the Homeless Council. During the September flood, homeless people in Boulder were refused entry to a Red Cross shelter despite the organization's policy to turn no one away, the Denver Post reported. After complaints, homeless people were eventually admitted.

Genty became involved in homeless ministry after a good friend developed a mental illness and ended up on the streets on Longmont. He said he tried repeatedly to convince his friend to move to Boulder, where there was a shelter and services.

"What took me a long time to realize was Longmont was his home," he said. "The people who live on the streets don't have a house, but they do have a home. And they have every right to be there as those of us who have a house."

The reasons for homelessness in Longmont are varied, Genty said. Mental illness and addiction are common. Poverty is a driving force. Many of the homeless people he knows are day laborers who cannot afford housing.

While the homeless members of his congregation are among the most vulnerable, their perspectives on survival and resilience have been important to others who were affected by the flood. Genty said.

"You see folks who have so very little and are so very grateful for what they do have. They look out for one another. This is a community that makes sure everyone else is OK. To me that's incredibly humbling and inspirational. Their faith is unconditional."

What the Homeless Brought to the Response



Common Cathedral leaders Chris Sandoval and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty point to many assets that the homeless members of the congregation brought to its flood response:

- **Relationships with other vulnerable people.** The homeless population knew one another's whereabouts and could report on their safety.
- **Willingness to volunteer.** Several members helped their neighbors in the "housed community" dig mud out of basements and remove debris. Others volunteered with the Red Cross, Genty said.
- **Commitment to their faith community.** Despite the flood, more than 30 members gathered for Common Cathedral's Friday evening liturgy to share a meal and talk about their experiences.
- **A spirit of gratitude.** The administrator of a local parish attended the Common Cathedral liturgy after learning that she had six feet of water in her basement, Genty said. "Hearing these folks talk about the grace of God in the midst of all this was a real gift to her."

Additional Resources



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

- *Tips & Lessons: Including the Homeless in Disaster Preparedness | Longmont, CO*
- *How To: Building Relationships for Response | New Orleans, LA*
- *How To: Winter Shelters | VA*

For more information on the US Disaster Program visit:

www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster