

U.S. Disaster Program

Disaster Preparedness – Tips and Lessons

For Colorado congregation, disaster preparedness means anticipating the needs of homeless members

At the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado’s Common Cathedral in Longmont the members include some of the city’s most vulnerable residents – people who live part or all of the year on the streets as a result of extreme poverty or the instabilities of mental illness or addiction. Because there is no permanent shelter in the city, many homeless people live in the green space along the St. Vrain River.

Yet when unprecedented rain and flooding besieged Longmont and the rest of Colorado’s Front Range in September 2013, not one member of the congregation’s homeless population was lost, despite the fact that the banks of the St. Vrain, where many camped, were washed away. All were accounted for within two days. And by the congregation’s Friday liturgy a few days later, many were receiving the sleeping bags, tarps, tents and supplies they needed to re-establish their camps. Common Cathedral leaders Chris Sandoval and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty say the relationships and trust forged in their unique faith community were key in finding their most vulnerable members and getting supplies to them after the storm.

They offer several insights on working with homeless people before, during and after a disaster:

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST BEFORE A DISASTER

“For people on the margins, relationship is everything,” said Genty. “The time to build relationships is not during a crisis. It’s now. So when the crisis happens it’s not the perceived ‘haves’ swooping in to pull out the perceived ‘have-nots.’”

Shared liturgy is one way to develop those relationships, said Sandoval, who serves as Common Cathedral’s lay pastor. He recommends regularly attending a church service or outreach that serves homeless people to get to know them over time.

Another important relationship for churches to develop is with local organizations that serve the homeless. Common Cathedral developed out of a secular outreach called Homeless Outreach Providing Encouragement (HOPE) in Longmont. Both Genty and Sandoval had volunteered with the group, learning valuable skills about responding to people on the streets.

Additionally, partnering and consulting with such groups during a disaster can ensure that



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



response to the needs of homeless people is appropriate and effective.

ALERT THE HOMELESS POPULATION TO UPCOMING CRISES

People on the streets have little access to media announcements of upcoming weather events, and can miss out on vital information about evacuations, shelters and food distribution. To make sure the word gets out, Genty said he maintains a network of contacts among sheltering organizations and homelessness outreaches. Because he works for the National Center for Atmospheric Research, he monitors weather news.

If he hears that severe weather is headed their way, Genty said he lets Sandoval know so that he can get word out when he is making his rounds. At the start of the Common Cathedral service they also announce any upcoming weather events and alert participants about whether shelters will be open.

KNOW HOW TO FIND HOMELESS PEOPLE AFTER A DISASTER

The homeless community often gathers in small groups of five or six people, forming “families” for protection and support, Sandoval said. After the flood, he used his knowledge of this network to find out how they they had fared. Those he could find would report on the safety of others. It took a day and a half of personal visits and conversations, but he was able to establish that no one had been lost in the storm.

Genty said they would like to have a system to receive information on their homeless members more directly when they need help. Common Cathedral is considering offering members identification cards or tags that instruct responders to contact Common Cathedral leaders if a homeless member is incapacitated.

SHARE RESOURCES AT LITURGIES OR COMMUNITY MEALS

Gatherings or outreaches that serve homeless people, such as community meals, are good places to offer supplies that homeless people need before and during a disaster. The Episcopal Diocese of Colorado and Episcopal Relief & Development provided funding for provisions that Sandoval distributed during the first Common Cathedral gathering after the storm.

DISTRIBUTE SUPPLIES FOR SURVIVAL YEAR ROUND

Genty said the following supplies are essential to surviving on the streets in cold places such as Colorado, whether there is a disaster or not:

- Wool socks, which are warmer and longer-lasting than cotton.
- Lightweight one-to-two person sized tarps.
- Sleeping bags.
- Rope.
- Food that is easy to carry and can be prepared without utilities. Genty suggests items that one might take on a backpacking trip.
- Notes, cards, and letters with words of encouragement and comfort.

“The folks who live on the streets in general have to transport all of their worldly possessions with them wherever they go,” Genty said. “So imagine what that would

Include Needs of Homeless In Disaster Planning



The needs of the homeless are often overlooked in emergency planning on local and state levels, according to the 2009 National Health Care for the Homeless Council Report, *Disaster Planning for People Experiencing Homelessness*.

While the report focuses on improving planning on these levels, there is also wisdom for groups that serve the homeless. For example, the report points out the importance of helping people on the streets develop their own personal preparedness strategies. Outreach groups can provide the following:

- Simple, easy-to-read, leaflets with information on how to access emergency information in a disaster, where to take pets, where to find pick-up points for evacuation and where emergency shelters are located.
- Preparedness trainings specifically designed for homeless people. In-person trainings are particularly effective for people who may be unable to read written notices. These might cover topics such as what to do if stranded, the dangers of seeking inappropriate shelter, and guidance on dealing with first responders.
- Emergency kits that contain water, a flashlight, first aid supplies, a whistle, a portable radio and batteries.
- Emergency health information cards that people can fill out to provide first responders with potentially life saving personal and medical information.

The report also encourages groups that serve the homeless to be involved in emergency preparedness planning on the local and state level.

A copy of the report can be found online at <http://bit.ly/1lxBC2A>.



mean if you or I had to do that. Additionally, access to things like electricity, hot water, batteries, etc. is usually very difficult.”

DON'T OVERWHELM OUTREACH GROUPS WITH DONATIONS

Before collecting or donating items for the homeless, contact groups that distribute them to make sure that they are needed and that the group has room to store the contributions.

“For us, during the floods, this turned out to be a huge challenge,” Genty said. “We have no church building and no offices, so Chris and I had to try to figure out how to store the donations at our homes and at the homes of several others. The natural instinct is to try to do something immediately, and there is certainly a need for that, but there is also a need for help and support weeks and months after the disaster has abated.”

The ministry routes financial donations through a dedicated account at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Fort Collins, which was set up for that purpose, said Genty, who also serves as deacon at St. Luke's.

“That way we have full financial accountability and responsibility, and folks have a tax deductible organization to which they can write their checks,” he said.

WELCOME THE GIFTS OF PEOPLE ON THE STREETS

People who would serve the homeless must “come in with the understanding that these folks are ... living out their lives with strength and courage and faith and survival resources.” Genty said. “We need to develop learning opportunities for partnership in times of crisis where both groups minister to each other.”

During the flood, members of the homeless community brought several gifts to the response effort, Genty said. Their willingness to look out for one another made it possible to locate missing members. Several helped remove mud and debris from homes that were flooded, and others volunteered with the Red Cross.

WORK TO PROVIDE SAFE, SECURE HOUSING FOR THE HOMELESS

Because people on the streets are most vulnerable to the hunger, cold and illness that can accompany a disaster, it's essential to make sure proper shelter will be available to them.

The September floods occurred at a time when shelter was most limited in Longmont. In response, a network of churches that provides a rotating shelter October through April opened a month early to assist the homeless population.

In some cases, people who work with the homeless must be ready to advocate for their rights to stay in disaster shelters. Officially, people do not need to prove they have a permanent address to stay at a Red Cross shelter after a disaster. However, there have been reports of homeless people being turned away. During the September floods, people without permanent addresses were initially barred from the Red Cross shelter in Boulder, a practice which was quickly corrected after advocates complained.

About Common Cathedral in Longmont

Modeled after a similar program in Boston, Longmont's Common Cathedral was developed to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of people on the streets, said The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty, who helped found the ministry in 2008. It has no office or dedicated building. Liturgy is held every Friday in a local park, regardless of the weather or temperature.

Anywhere from 30 to 70 people attend the weekly service. Most are homeless, but other members are from the more affluent “housed population” and some travel in from the suburbs, Genty said.

The liturgy is non-traditional and collaborative, designed to appeal to people who are churched and unchurched alike. The group sings, shares prayer and reads a passage of Scripture, which they discuss.

“You get to hear how these stories that are so familiar to us sound to people on the streets,” Genty said.

If a priest is present, they share consecrated bread. The service closes with a hot meal provided by one of several local churches that support the ministry.

Additional Resources



View a video on Common Cathedral at vimeo.com/21069968.

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

- *Success Stories: Assisting the Homeless After a Flood* | CO
- *How To: Building Relationships for Response* | New Orleans, LA
- *How To: Winter Shelters* | VA

Learn more about the US Disaster Program at www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster