

Considerations When Developing a Plan

A disaster plan is a guide developed by a group of people (a family, a congregation, a judicatory, an agency, a business) who are concerned with:

- ◆ Protecting property
- ◆ Continuing services
- ◆ Caring for members of the group
- ◆ Recovering or repairing disaster-related damages
- ◆ Communications or public information

Such a plan is relevant and useful if it is:

- ◆ Developed by the people who are concerned.
- ◆ Tailored to the specific geographical situation and needs of the members.
- ◆ Implemented and tested, to the extent possible, before disaster strikes.
- ◆ Developed to include training for persons responsible during an emergency.
- ◆ Reviewed and updated regularly.

The process of planning together is as important, if not more important, than a document on a shelf. In a group planning process, individual concerns are expressed. Priorities are set and values assigned to property and to needs of persons. Persons get to know each other's gifts and capabilities. Energy is generated for caring for one another in a crisis. Even if a catastrophic disaster never happens, many positive benefits result from the interaction when intentionally planning disaster preparedness and response.

Get to know your "in-house" talent. You may be surprised at the disaster-related personal experiences, professions and expertise already surrounding you! Find out if there are nurses, emergency medical technicians, doctors, firefighters, police, home builders, cooks, mental health professionals, teachers, childcare professionals or people experienced in volunteer mission work. Their perspective and expertise can add valuable insight to your disaster preparedness and response plan.

Play "devil's advocate." When your team begins formulating its disaster preparedness and response plan, don't be afraid to suggest why something won't work – and then suggest an alternative or backup plan. The more "what if" scenarios you imagine – the more for which you'll be ready.

Test, test, test. Make a team commitment to regularly test and refine your plan. How often you test depends on your region, the characteristics of your community and the time commitment of your team. Keep in mind that business continuity officials have found that periodically testing a disaster response plan helps people automatically take action – even when they’re unable to think. On the other hand, the same officials found that testing too often can result in complacency.

Revise, revise, revise. Each time you test your plan, you will probably need to revise it in some way. Then, incorporate those revisions into your next test. In addition, if a disaster happens and you put your plan into action, hold a meeting less than eight weeks after the disaster with the sole purpose of discussing revisions to your disaster response plan.

AREAS ON WHICH TO FOCUS

You will find that refining your plan involves a significant time commitment. After determining the areas on which you will initially focus, you may want to split your team into specific areas and assign a few people to each area. Following are a few examples of areas – but your unique needs will require some careful thought as to which areas you tackle.

Get to know your disaster response community. Getting in touch with your state and local disaster response community can be a time consuming job – but it is one of the most important and informative tasks you face. Designate a few people to call or e-mail state and local emergency management offices, the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster team, denominational response groups, the local American Red Cross and The Salvation Army chapters, and other groups. You will find that your area likely already has a thriving disaster response community. Get a seat at that table from the start.

Set up an emergency communications network. Where is the nearest hospital? The next nearest? Is there a list of emergency phone numbers by each telephone in the facility? Is the fire extinguisher working? Designate someone on your team to handle emergency communications or response. Being ready could save lives.

Map the mental health services. Is somebody on your team – or within your community – a licensed mental health worker? Ask that person or persons to coordinate a mental health preparedness and response plan. Part of their job is to network with other mental health services in the community so that you will know where to refer people during or after a disaster.

Study other judicatory plans. Find out which of your fellow judicatories or churches already have disaster preparedness or response plans. Ask if you can review a copy of their plans as a guide to formulating your own. Then you won't be "reinventing the wheel" – you'll be tailoring the wheel to your specific needs.

Invite expert speakers. Ask the public information officer from your state or local emergency management office to speak. Or hold a panel discussion with him or her, a representative from the American Red Cross, an experienced volunteer from a denominational response group and a pastor who has participated in disaster response. You're likely to foster interesting real-life stories and shared experiences that will inspire your team to keep formulating and refining their plan.

Hunt down the hazards. Dispatch a person or persons to "hunt down the hazards" in your community. What are the obvious potential disasters – and the not so obvious? Is the most vulnerable population really what you've always thought – or are there hidden vulnerabilities you need to know about?

Prepare your facility. You can't respond to other's needs if your own facility isn't prepared. Designate a person or persons who can assess the readiness of your physical facility, research the cost of mitigation and backup systems, and train people on how to prepare their building in the event of disaster.

Don't forget the larger picture. Ask your team to meet and put together "Gift of the Heart" kits for CWS, or kits for your denomination's disaster response organization. As you prepare to respond locally, being aware of disasters happening elsewhere can give you the compassion and inspiration to continue.

Go out and mitigate. Is there substandard housing in your community? Is Habitat for Humanity actively seeking volunteers? By participating in rebuilding or repairing projects before disaster strikes, you are reducing people's vulnerability.

Use technology. Find the people on your team who are most computer savvy. Then ask them to figure out ways to use technology to help carry out your preparedness and response plan. Will you e-mail important disaster-related information? Does your Web site have a link to Church World Service, Disaster News Network or your denominational response group's Web site?