



The Role of Faith Communities in Disasters

Faith-based disaster programs are integral to all phases of disaster work. For instance, the work that religious organizations can accomplish as interfaith or faith-based networks creates the backbone for all long-term recovery operations. This tip sheet provides a broad spectrum of ways that religious organizations can engage in disaster work, with General Tips as well as suggested activities in the Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Phases.

Unique Offerings of Religious Leaders and Houses of Worship

- **Comfort & Hope:** In a disaster, religious leaders are trusted caregivers who people turn to for assistance and support for healing. You can offer comfort, support, clarity, and direction in times of crisis. You are in a unique position to respond to people who are impacted by a disaster because you are already in an established role and you bring a faith perspective to the community's need for meaning after a disaster.
- **Worship Services/Events**
 - **The primary role of religious leaders** is to help communities find meaning in crisis. Providing opportunities and leading prayer/worship services provide an essential foundation for community recovery.
 - **Work with your partners to offer community-based worship services** and other healing events such as anniversary commemorations. Target different audiences: youth, seniors, etc.
- **Justice and Healing**
 - In all of your interactions, be a voice of reason and a “non-anxious presence.”
 - Use your connections with politicians and community leaders as well as your place at coordinative entities such as NYDIS, and community councils to:
 - **Provide expertise** on particular needs of affected populations
 - **Provide religious and cultural guidance** on, and assistance expediting and implementing best practices, funeral and burial services
 - **Promote** efforts to curtail disaster-related bias crimes

General Tips to Help You Determine and Plan for Other Disaster Roles

- **Ensure that your congregation has a Disaster Continuity Plan in place:** You will not be able to assist with the recovery of your community if your congregation is not prepared to protect its members, assets and programs. Make sure your plan: (1) focuses on all hazards likely to affect your congregation; and (2) addresses how clergy and key staff will assume leadership if they and their families are affected. See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Continuity of Operations Planning: Ministry & Services Post Disaster.”**
- **Support your faith community’s national disaster service provider:** See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “National Faith-Based Disaster Service Organizations”** or www.nvoad.org for a list of faith-based disaster programs.
- **If your house of worship is considering short-term recovery roles, do your homework:** Learn about the services that major disaster players like the American Red Cross, The Salvation Army and FEMA provide and consider partnering with them. Take FEMA’s Independent Study course, “The Role of Voluntary Agencies in Emergency Management”: www.training.fema.gov.
- **Think long-term:** There is always a tendency for disaster recovery organizations (including faith-based) to spend too much, too early. At the beginning of the recovery process, plan to engage with NYDIS in supporting the long-term unmet needs of victims.
- **Become involved with NYDIS and other community and disaster networks:** In New York City, these include New York Disaster Interfaith Services (www.nydis.org), New York City Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (212.669.6100), the Human Services Council (www.humanservicescouncil.org), and Citizen Corps Council (www.nyc.gov/oem). These are great places to network, to learn about the various disaster human services roles, and find out about training opportunities.
- **Build on your strengths:** If your congregation already has effective community outreach or service programs, focus your energy on expanding your “core competencies.” Consider which populations you are uniquely positioned to serve – i.e., specific religious, ethnic, cultural, or age groups.

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- **Be aware of conduct protocols:** Orient yourself to the ethics of working with a traumatized community. It is commonly considered unethical to proselytize when doing disaster work. Educate your staff and volunteers about the language, cultural, and religious practices and needs of the community you seek to serve.
- **Written agreements:** Secure written agreements with organizations doing similar or complimentary work to yours.
- **Ensure your programs are available to all:** Make sure you think about access for people with disabilities, seniors, and non-English speakers. This includes ensuring physical access for those who use wheelchairs and walking aids, providing materials in alternate formats as well as gaining the trust of and communicating to specific communities.
- **Be flexible:** What is written into your plan may not be what's needed during a particular disaster.

Suggested Mitigation & Preparedness Roles

- **HOWCALM™** : The House of Worship Communitywide Asset and Logistics Management (HOWCALM™) System, built and managed by NYDIS, tracks the logistics and resources of faith communities in NYC. By registering in HOWCALM™, you will be connected to education and training opportunities, as well as regularly updated information when disasters occur (www.howcalm.org).
- Encourage participation in training and community preparedness programs including:
 - New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS) Programs
 - NYDIS Volunteer Leaders: www.nydis.org
 - NYDIS Disaster Chaplains: www.nydis.org
 - NYC Office of Emergency Management Programs (NYC OEM)
 - Ready NY: www.nyc.gov/oem/ready
 - Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT): www.nyc.gov/oem/cert
 - New York City Police Department (NYPD) Programs: www.nyc.gov/nypd
- Train to volunteer for local response programs of the American Red Cross in Greater NY (www.nyredcross.org) and The Salvation Army of Greater New York (www.salvationarmy-newyork.org).
- Participate in Disaster Advocacy: Through NYDIS and NYCVOAD, support legislation and local laws that promote individual recovery.
- Promote tolerance and build a more disaster-resilient city by helping to prevent post-disaster bias crimes. See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Disaster Backlash: Bias Crimes & Mitigation.”**



Suggested Response & Recovery Roles

- **Offer your facilities:** Facilities of all sizes and make-ups can be used in many ways during disasters, including as warehouses, shelters, and assistance centers. See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “How to Use Your House of Worship in a Disaster.”**
- **Short-Term recovery services:** Home clean-up, child-care, and food services are just a few of the ways you can assist.
- **Encourage volunteering to support existing programs** (including ones listed here): It is best for volunteers to affiliate with an organization before a disaster: Look into agencies such as The Salvation Army, American Red Cross of Greater New York, and NYDIS. During disasters, you can find information about disaster volunteer projects through New York Cares (www.nycares.org).
- **Disaster Chaplaincy:** NYDIS offers Disaster Chaplaincy training and services for member faith communities (www.nydis.org).
- **Support New York City Unmet Needs Round Tables:** The Unmet Needs Roundtable brings together donors and case work agencies to financially assist those impacted by a disaster, provide emergency assistance, and ensure victims' long-term recovery in cases when all other means of assistance are no longer available (www.nydis.org). Congregations should fundraise to help support the unmet needs of disaster victims. NYDIS manages a fund for this purpose to which congregations can contribute.
- **Help local causes:** Social Service organizations are often neglected during disasters as media attention focuses on relief efforts. Support existing social service programs and provide opportunities for others to support your programs.
- **Host work groups from other houses of worship:** Facilitate the participation of your (and other) religious organizations' houses of worship in local recovery efforts.

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