

DISASTER RESPONSE

WHAT TO DO AND WHEN

Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Wildfires.

2017 was a particularly devastating year. And when natural disasters hit, people often want to help their fellow global citizens rebuild *immediately*. But did you know that your volunteer work could actually be more effective months and years after a disaster?

“The impulse to go help right away always comes from a really good place, a compassionate place,” says Stephanie Soderstrom, RCA coordinator for Volunteer Engagement. “But when communities face a crisis, they’re using all of their resources to help their own

people and the skilled emergency responders. At that moment they don’t have places for volunteers to stay or eat. ... There is so much that goes into helping a community rebuild, but the majority of that doesn’t happen when it’s on the news.”

So what can you do to lend a hand—and when? Here’s an outline of what’s needed, and how you can be of service in the days, weeks, months, and years after disaster strikes.

Disaster Period

Rescue phase First few days after disaster

The U.S. National Guard, along with trained responders from organizations like the Red Cross, rescue survivors and treat people who are injured. In Canada, Public Safety Canada organizes response to domestic disasters.

What can you do? Pray. Give financially. Contact the RCA Volunteer Engagement team, who can let you know when our mission partner World Renew Disaster Response Services (DRS) is ready to send out volunteers.

Rapid response phase Early weeks after disaster

Only necessary personnel, such as volunteers with medical skills, should consider going to the disaster site. These volunteers should always partner with a disaster response agency such as World Renew DRS.

What can you do? Pack and send **needed** supplies (see next page). Make plans to help in the future. “One of the best things is when churches call us and say, ‘I want to help nine months from now,’” says Soderstrom. “Making a long-term commitment can be a great way to keep that community at the forefront of your mind.”

Recovery Period

“Rebuilding in the aftermath of disaster ... is more complicated, more costly, and much more time consuming than building from scratch. ... The rebuilding process can easily go on for years. In our case, it has taken six years.”

—Sherri Meyer-Veen, pastor of Schoharie Reformed Church in New York, which was damaged by Hurricane Irene in 2011. The congregation was able to move back into its rebuilt fellowship hall just this past fall.

Early recovery phase Two to three months after disaster

Volunteers with experience mucking out homes and those willing to assess victims’ needs can help.

What can you do? Continue donating supplies and funds. (Don’t just send your Goodwill donations. Instead, contact the Red Cross for a list of specific needs in the area. Church World Service also offers handy guides for packing hygiene and cleaning supply kits at www.cwskits.org.) Volunteer to go door to door to talk to victims, assess their needs, and help make recovery plans for the community. Help remove debris and mud from damaged homes.

Long-term recovery phase Three months to several years later

Volunteers of all skill levels are needed to help with reconstruction.

What can you do? Send a group to help rebuild—youth groups included! Work with the Volunteer Engagement team to find a time and place to serve. Remember that recovery can take years and plan accordingly. “Knowing that we were not alone and not forgotten, even years later, was invaluable to our own rebuilding and healing process,” says Meyer-Veen.

The RCA Volunteer Engagement team is currently working with World Renew DRS to send disaster response volunteers to the southern United States and some Caribbean islands. For more information, visit www.rca.org/volunteer.