

After a disaster occurs, such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or flood, it is natural for the church to reach out to assist storm victims. Such assistance sometimes involves churches sending teams of workers into disaster areas to help with relief and recovery efforts.

While relief teams provide needed support to areas devastated by a disaster, the teams can be exposed to a variety of dangers, including mold, raw sewage, contaminated water, infectious disease, toxic or hazardous substances, reptiles and dangerous work sites. Teams should be trained to follow safe practices to ensure that one disaster does not follow another. To help protect relief workers, and the church that sent the workers, consider the following.

Before You Go

Consult an expert. Churches should coordinate their relief efforts with agencies and organizations experienced in relief work. Denominational and other religious disaster relief agencies, such as the American Red Cross, have knowledge of the needs of a particular area and how to best respond to those needs. Consider aligning your church with a sponsoring disaster relief organization that will provide structure at the destination site, rather than attempting to do it on your own.

Select your team carefully. The relief team may face a challenging environment and physically demanding work. For those reasons, use caution in selecting the relief team members to include only those whose physical and mental health is compatible with the rigors of the work they will be performing. Discuss the physical requirements for the work that is anticipated with the sponsoring disaster relief organization.

Obtain health clearance and immunizations. Relief workers should receive medical clearance from their doctors in order to participate. Ideally, workers should be assessed at least four to six weeks before travel so that any necessary vaccinations, such as tetanus/diphtheria and/or the hepatitis B series can be given.

Receive training and education. Learn from the sponsoring relief organization about the type of work the relief team will be participating in and find out what pre-trip training opportunities are available. For example, First Aid training, “mudout” training, and other classes may be available from the American Red Cross and from denominational or private relief agencies. The American Red Cross also offers disaster services training. Research the weather at the relief site to assist your team in knowing what clothes to pack. Keep up-to-date on the general situation at the relief site through media and Web sources.

Coordinate food, water, lodging, and transportation. Clean water and food can be in short supply following a natural disaster. Talk to your sponsoring disaster relief organization to ensure that there will be a sufficient supply of clean water and food during your trip or, alternatively, that water treatment will be available. Likewise, determine in advance what the lodging and sleeping arrangements will be. Finally, make appropriate arrangements for transportation of the relief team to and from the site. Avoid cheap transportation alternatives that lack preventative safety measures, such as the use of 15-passenger vans.

Understand equipment and tool needs and use. Discuss with your sponsoring disaster relief organization the equipment and tools that will be made available to your team and those that you are requested to bring along. Make sure that all team members receive proper training on the use of equipment and tools, especially power equipment.

Check insurance. Discuss the coverage afforded by your church's current policy for the volunteer and employee members of the relief team with your insurance agent. This is particularly important if your relief efforts involve international travel. Consider supplemental liability, property, and/or workers' compensation coverage for your team, if necessary.

Consider releases. The members of your disaster relief team should know that, despite precautions, there are risks inherent in disaster relief activities. Given their assumption of these risks, it is not unreasonable to ask team members to release the church from liability for any injury or damage that may occur to them while participating. Likewise, have a list of emergency contacts for each team member; and consider requesting a consent for emergency medical treatment in the release document. A sample "Disaster Relief Volunteer Agreement and Release" document is available from SafeChurch or GuideOne.com at <https://www.guideone.com/SafetyResources/Churches/emergencyindex.htm>

While You Are There

Complete orientation and training. Once the team has arrived at its destination, they should receive orientation about the project from the sponsoring disaster relief organization. They also should receive training on the specifics of their work, the work site, equipment, tools and safety procedures. Proper orientation and training are crucial to the team's safety and to the effectiveness of their work.

Use personal protective equipment. For general cleanup work, hard hats, goggles, ear plugs, heavy work gloves and watertight boots with a steel toe and insole should be provided. Additional protection is required if working in buildings with mold contamination.

Protect against mold exposure. Exposure to mold can lead to serious respiratory and health complications. Assume that mold is present in all water-damaged buildings and take the risk of mold exposure seriously. At a minimum, be sure that all workers have skin, eye and respiratory protection. The use of full-face air purifying respirators, long gloves that extend to the middle of the forearm, and disposable clothing, such as a Tyvek body suit are recommended. Goggles should not have ventilated openings. Clean and/or dispose of clothing and protective equipment as recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency. For information on protecting yourself from mold, visit the EPA's Web site at www.epa.gov/mold/.

Follow safe practices. Team leaders should make sure that safe practices are followed during the relief effort, such as avoiding downed power lines, using teams of two or more people to lift heavy or bulky objects, making sure only trained people use power equipment, utilizing proper protective equipment and not overtaxing team members' physical capabilities.

Prevent heat-related illness. Take frequent breaks, drink plenty of clean water and other nonalcoholic liquids, stay indoors or in shaded areas, and wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing.

Keep opposite sexes separate. Relief teams are commonly made up of a mix of married and single persons of both genders. Establish clear boundaries and separate sleeping quarters for men and women.

Wash hands often. According to the Centers for Disease Control, frequent hand washing using soap and water removes potentially infectious material from the skin and helps prevent transmission of both respiratory and enteric diseases. Waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizer may be used when soap is not available and hands are not visibly soiled.

Practice First Aid. Clean all open wounds and cuts with soap and clean water. Apply an antibiotic ointment. Contact a doctor to find out if more treatment, such as a tetanus shot, is needed. If the wound gets red, swells, or drains, seek immediate medical attention.

Follow security measures. Discuss with your sponsoring disaster relief organization the security of the work site and the surrounding neighborhood. Follow their recommendations on security, as well as any information provided by local law enforcement. Obey any curfews that have been imposed by local authorities. Emphasize the importance of staying with the group and not wandering off.

After You Return

Consider medical evaluations. Those team members returning home ill or injured should seek evaluation and treatment from a healthcare professional. Similarly, relief team members who experience fever, rash, respiratory illness, diarrhea/intestinal upset, or other unexplained symptoms in close proximity to the trip should seek care from a medical provider.

Protect mental health. Depending on what your team has experienced and witnessed, psychological or mental health support and/or counseling for team members may be appropriate.

Additional Information

For additional information on how to keep disaster relief teams safe, contact the following organizations:

- Centers for Disease Control (CDC): www.bt.cdc.gov
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): www.epa.gov/mold/
- American Red Cross: www.redcross.org

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