

US DISASTER PROGRAM

How To: Community Crisis Canvassing Project



Preparedness Planning Tools

CASE STUDY

When the town of Munster, Indiana was flooded in September 2008, over 1,000 homes were damaged and 5,000 residents were evacuated. With his vestry, Rev. Ben Jones of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, a small family-sized parish in the Chicago area, decided that it was more important to decide who they helped than focusing on what they gave them. For their response efforts, the congregation at St. Paul's Episcopal Church raised \$12,000 from Episcopal Relief & Development, their diocese and other private donors to buy 247 \$50 gift cards from a local all-in-one store. Through a list provided by the city, they distributed to people who needed more help than the government could provide, and also identified a specific neighborhood that needed their assistance. They canvassed sections of the neighborhood in teams of 4, distributing the cards and listening to home owners. After the cards were all gone, the volunteers met at the church and shared their different stories from the day.

START YOUR OWN COMMUNITY CRISIS CANVASSING PROJECT

By: Rev. Ben Jones, St. Paul's Episcopal Church

1. ASSEMBLE THE NECESSARY VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPLIES.

- A. Look to what resources you may already have. All you really need for this project are some printed cards with your church information on it and a prayer, the gift cards, pens and clip boards. (St. Paul's episcopal Church used supplies collected from an earlier bike-ride fundraiser. They even have first aid kits available.)
- B. Without volunteers this project can't happen – a big part of the planning process is getting those volunteers. Get as many volunteers from the church as possible. (In the end St. Paul's had 30 people come out to help distribute cards, but this project could have had many more.)
 - Rev. Jones found the best way to get volunteers was to call each family personally. That way he could tell them what



BIOGRAPHY

Rev. Ben Jones set up a Crisis Canvassing Project with his congregation after flooding in his community.

FAST FACTS

CONGREGATION: St. Paul's Episcopal church

LOCATION: Munster, Indiana

POPULATION: 22,500

CONGREGATION: St. Paul's Episcopal Church

DISASTER RELIEF: Distributing gift cards to persons in need.

exactly what was needed. He explained they would be working in teams, so they would never be alone, and answered any other the questions they had.

- Don't be afraid to ask for help or to delegate. (Rev. Jones suggests one or two people help with the organization and logistics.)

C. Get and/or create any supplies you don't have.

- Buy the gift cards. When making a large purchase, it might be easier to order the cards through a website and have them delivered, instead of buying them directly at the store.

- Try to get a large map of the area you'll be working in so you can block off streets or sections for each team.

- Develop any necessary forms, etc. – Keeping track of inventory to show our donors was very important to me. Keep in mind what kind of follow-up you want to do and make sure you have the information you need for that. For example, phone numbers for calling back flood victims could be very important.

2. DECIDE WHO IS A PRIORITY FOR DISTRIBUTION AND WHERE THEY ARE.

A. Find out which people are falling through the cracks. (Through a parishioner, Rev. Jones was able to contact the city. They were given a list of people that needed extra help, beyond what the government could give.)

B. Look at where the most damage happened. Use your large map and geographically identify who may need help.

3. ORGANIZE THE DISTRIBUTION.

A. Divide volunteers into teams so they don't have to work alone. We had teams comprised of two pairs, working the same section of neighborhood together.

B. Use the big map to divide up the areas of distribution. This way each team will know where they are going, and which homes are priorities.

- Print small maps of the area for your volunteers. (Because the volunteers in Munster knew the area well, they were able to set out without little maps of the area they were to canvas.)

4. ON THE DAY OF THE EVENT:

A. Meet beforehand.

- Find a space to meet. Often the church is most convenient, but if it is far away, it might be a good idea to look for other options. Make sure the space has bathrooms and enough seats.

- Training:

1.Explain what each team will do and where they will go – train



them in the use of any forms. Let them know the best way to record information. (In Munster, one team member recorded information while the other spoke to the homeowner.)

2. If it would benefit your volunteers, briefly discuss pastoral care and how to listen emphatically before starting out. (Since St. Paul's volunteers were so close to the disaster, they had a good idea that much of their job would be to listen.)
 3. Make sure volunteers have the names and numbers of other organizations in case people need other services. Maybe this information could be on preprinted cards.
 4. Make sure any necessary safety precautions are taken. (*St. Paul's volunteers had first aid kits left over from their bike ride.*)
- B. Have a back-up plan.
- If a recipient is not home the day of the distribution, volunteers should move on, handing out cards until they are all gone. A week or two later, a different team should distribute cards to families that were not home.
- C. A debrief at the end of the day is very important. Volunteers will have seen and felt many new things and will likely want to share their experiences.
- Make sure you have a space for debriefing to take place.
 - Identify someone to lead the discussion. (As the parish priest, Rev. John led the discussion. He asked volunteers to share the stories of people they met, how they were received, and how people interacted with them.)

5. FOLLOW-UP – RECONNECTING WITH THE FLOOD-AFFECTED FAMILIES IS VERY IMPORTANT!

- A. Make sure you follow-up within the first 3 months. (When Rev. John contacted people a year later, some were impossible to find. Either contact information had changed or they'd moved away.)
- Invite recipients to the church to talk about their experiences a year later.
 - Have the original volunteers call people they found with outstanding needs to make sure they had received assistance.

FOLLOW-UP!

It's important to recognize everyone who participated in the project. Here are some ways to thank everyone involved:

- Use your church newsletter to thank volunteers recognize them during services.
- A typed or hand-written thank you letters to all our donors is also appreciated.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on helping flood victims, please see the following online resources:

"How To: Community Crisis Canvassing Project."

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.er-d.org.

COMMUNITY CRISIS CANVASSING PROJECT: DISTRIBUTING GIFT CARDS TO FLOOD VICTIMS IN INDIANA

On September 14, when heavy rains brought flood waters within half a mile of their church, the members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Munster, Indiana were anxious to figure out how they could best help their neighbors. Within the first two days their rector, Rev. Ben Jones, started making calls to people with experience in flood relief for advice on what to do. Rev. Jones received all kinds of suggestions on what sorts of assistance St. Paul's could distribute to the community: flood kits (a bucket with a mop, rags, etc.), food and/or clothes.

After much reflection, the church decided that the important question to answer was who to help rather than what to give.

Munster is a middle-income town on the outskirts of Chicago. It's not a particularly low-lying area, and the 2008 flood was completely unexpected. St. Paul's is a small church of about 70 members, with everyone from small children to grandparents. Despite their small size, the congregation has strong ties to the community, and through a parishioner Rev. Jones found a city employee who was able to give him a list of names and addresses of people who needed extra help, beyond what the government could give. Because Rev. Jones and the church members wanted to allow the recipients to determine what they needed, they decided to hand out \$50 gift cards from a local all-in-one store to be used as the person felt best.

The next step was to find volunteers to canvas the neighborhoods and hand out the gift cards. Rev. Jones called each family in the parish and invited them to participate. He made sure to alleviate any fears they might have: he clarified what he was asking them to do, he specified that they would be working in teams and would not be alone, and he assured them that they would be trained before setting out and that each person would have an official name badge.

One Sunday afternoon two weeks after the flood receded, around 30 volunteers gathered with Rev. Jones at the church, many bringing their children. Rev. Jones told the volunteers that they would be divided into teams of 4, and each team needed one team captain. These teams were responsible for handing out cards to specific addresses on the city list as well as any other people they might find working at their homes within their assigned area. In case the volunteers encountered anyone with needs bigger than a gift card or a listening ear could solve, Rev. Jones gave the volunteers the phone number for an organization that had been set up to provide referrals to assist with specific needs.

Finally, each team captain signed for the cards they were to



FAST FACTS

Congregation: St. Paul's Episcopal church

Location: Munster, Indiana

Population: 22,500

Congregation: St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Disaster Relief: Distributing gift cards to persons in need.

distribute (each card was numbered for better tracking), and the teams set out.

As teams walked through the neighborhoods they saw the devastation, and as volunteer Marie Gambetta described, were met with an overwhelming odor of mold, mildew and rot. They were invited into homes, they saw what was lost and what was saved, and lent support as people grieved the loss of pictures and memories. For Gambetta, a mother of two, a very poignant story for her was of entering the home of a woman who was devastated because she didn't even have a Christmas decoration left.

They had decided to go out on a Sunday, hoping that it would be the best time to find people cleaning their homes. Though they wanted to reach as many people as possible, volunteers were initially nervous about simply showing up in these devastated communities. It worried them how individuals would respond to groups of volunteers who had suffered nothing, offering a paltry \$50 to people who had suffered huge losses. But time and again, volunteers only saw how thankful people were.

People seemed so thankful to have someone just to talk to and cry with, thankful that there was so much goodness around them, and thankful because "God was good."

At the end of the day, the volunteers all met back at the church to discuss what they had seen and heard, what they felt and how it had changed them. Rev. Jones believes that for the 30 parishioners that participated, the project was life-changing. These volunteers had been nervous going in and were transformed; he believes that like Gambetta if they were ever asked to do something like this again, would do so "without hesitation."

FOLLOW-UP!

- Most of the gift cards were handed out that first Sunday, but a few people from the city list weren't home. For those families, a second distribution was planned within the following two weeks.
- A year later the congregation invited card recipients to the church to share their stories with them. Five families participated in the event, and this was a meaningful activity for volunteers as well as a great opportunity for them to share their experience with the rest of the congregation.
- If Rev. Jones were to do this project again, he would like to make sure follow-up was done sooner – within the first three months after the distribution. He also thinks it's key that the original volunteers involved in the distribution should be involved in whatever kind of follow-up you decide on.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on helping flood victims, please see the following online resources:

"How To: Community Crisis Canvassing Project."

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.er-d.org.