

LAMPLIGHT - FEBRUARY 2014

Lamplight

A Newsletter of the US Disaster Program



"Be dressed, ready for service and keep your lamps burning." — LUKE 12:35

A Note From Katie

We've been working closely with church leaders in Colorado as they continue to respond to the flooding that occurred there last fall. In this *Lamplight*, you can learn more about how one congregation, made up primarily of homeless people, was able to locate its members after the flood thanks to the systems they had in place that made that response possible.

Please join me in keeping them, and all those responding to disasters around the country and the world, in prayer.

Peace,
Katie Mears
Director, US Disaster Program

Articles

Recognizing the Needs and Gifts of the Homeless after a Flood

Tips for Including the Homeless in Disaster Preparedness

US Disaster Program Trains Dioceses in Disaster Preparedness and Response

Recognizing the Needs and Gifts of the Homeless after a Flood

When Colorado's Front Range was besieged with unprecedented rainfall and flooding over a 200-mile area in September 2013, eight people lost their lives and more than 2,000 homes were destroyed. In Longmont, a city about 15 miles from Boulder, the homeless population that camps along the St. Vrain River lost not only their possessions but the very ground they lived on as the river bank was swept away.

Many of them were members of Common Cathedral, a congregation of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado that is comprised mostly of people who live on the streets. After the flood, the congregation's leaders worked with the network of homeless people in the community to track down members and determine their needs.

Despite the severity of the flood, none of the congregation's homeless members were lost, said The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty, who helped found the ministry in 2008.

Every Friday night anywhere from 30 to 70 people attend Common Cathedral's open-air liturgy and hot meal in Collyer Park in Longmont. Most live on the streets, though some have homes and drive in to attend.

Each service begins with the statement: "We are a community of faith, a community of fellowship, a community of equals, and a community of friends," Genty said.

The strength of that community was key in locating Common Cathedral's most vulnerable members after the storm. Chris Sandoval, one of Common Cathedral's leaders hit the streets to find them.

"When you're on the streets and homeless, you're a family," said Sandoval, who was himself homeless in Longmont for seven years. "Everyone takes care of the group they're in. Sometimes there are six or seven in a group, staying together. Everybody knows where everybody down there lives."

Sandoval located several homeless members, who in turn reported on the safety of others. It took a day and a half to learn that everyone had made it to safety. No lives were lost. The rain had fallen for several days, giving people time to make it to drier places.

"They managed this incredibly well because it was something they were used to doing," Genty said. "They are used to losing their homes time and again and rebuilding. A flood is not that much different from police raiding their sites."

Still, for those that lived in the green way along the St. Vrain, the flood took everything. Other congregation members with houses faced substantial losses, as well. One formerly homeless couple had recently married and had managed to leave the streets and move into a trailer, Genty said. It caught fire during the flood and was destroyed.

The Friday after the flood, about 30 people attended the Common Cathedral liturgy at Collyer Park. Sandoval distributed new sleeping bags, tents and rope funded by the Diocese of Colorado and Episcopal Relief & Development.

Donations poured in from other Episcopal congregations as well.

It really helped us feel that we were not alone, that our little community of faith was part of something much larger, and there was great comfort in that,” Genty said. Inquiries about how the members of Common Cathedral are doing are still coming in, he said, and people are still offering assistance.

“The bigger challenge is finding places to rebuild, places to hole up,” Genty said.

Living on the streets is illegal in Longmont. The nearest permanent shelter is in Boulder, 15 miles and three bus transfers away. In Longmont, a network of churches provides a rotating homeless shelter October through April. They opened a month early in response to the storm.

But many of the resources for those displaced by a disaster aren’t always available to people without permanent addresses, Sandoval pointed out. Groups that work with the homeless have reported instances of people being turned away from disaster services because they didn’t have addresses, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council. During the September flood, homeless people in Boulder were refused entry to a Red Cross shelter despite the organization’s policy to turn no one away, the Denver Post reported. After complaints, homeless people were eventually admitted.

Genty became involved in homeless ministry after a good friend developed a mental illness and ended up on the streets on Longmont. He said he tried repeatedly to convince his friend to move to Boulder where there was a shelter and services.

“What took me a long time to realize was Longmont was his home,” he said. “The people who live on the streets don’t have a house, but they do have a home. And they have every right to be there as those of us who have a house.”

The reasons for homelessness in Longmont are varied, Genty said. Mental illness and addiction are common. Poverty is a driving force. Many of the homeless people he knows are day laborers who cannot afford housing.

While the homeless members of his congregation are among the most vulnerable, their perspectives on survival and resilience have been important to others who were affected by the flood. Genty said.

“You see folks who have so very little and are so very grateful for what they do have. They look out for one another. This is a community that makes sure everyone else is OK. To me that’s incredibly humbling and inspirational. Their faith is unconditional.”

A downloadable version of this article can be found at www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary

Back to Top

Tips for Including the Homeless in Disaster Preparedness Efforts

Common Cathedral leaders Chris Sandoval and The Rev. Deacon Marc Genty say the relationships and trust forged in their unique faith community were key in finding their most vulnerable members and getting supplies to them after the storm. They offer several insights on working with homeless people before, during and after a disaster:

Build Relationships of Trust before a Disaster

“For people on the margins, relationship is everything,” said Genty. “The time to build relationships is not during a crisis. It’s now. So when the crisis happens it’s not the perceived ‘haves’ swooping in to pull out the perceived ‘have-nots.’”

Shared liturgy is one way to develop those relationships, said Sandoval, who serves as Common Cathedral’s lay pastor. He recommends regularly attending a church service or outreach that serves homeless people to get to know them over time.

Another important relationship for churches to develop is with local organizations that serve the homeless. Common Cathedral developed out of a secular outreach called Homeless Outreach Providing Encouragement (HOPE) in Longmont. Both Genty and Sandoval had volunteered with the group, learning valuable skills about responding to people on the streets.

Additionally, partnering and consulting with such groups during a disaster can ensure that response to the needs of homeless people is appropriate and effective.

Alert the homeless population to upcoming Crises

People on the streets have little access to media announcements of upcoming weather events, and can miss out on vital information about evacuations, shelters and food distribution. To make sure the word gets out, Genty said he maintains a network of contacts among sheltering organizations and homelessness outreaches. Because he works for the National Center for Atmospheric Research, he monitors weather news.

If he hears that severe weather is headed their way, Genty said he lets Sandoval know so that he can get word out when he is making his rounds. At the start of the Common Cathedral service they also announce any upcoming weather events and alert participants about whether shelters will be open.

Know How to find Homeless people After a Disaster

The homeless community often gathers in small groups of five or six people, forming “families” for protection and support, Sandoval said. After the flood, he used his knowledge of this network to find out how they had fared. Those he could find would report on the safety of others. It took a day and a half of personal visits and conversations, but he was able to establish that no one had been lost in the storm.

Genty said they would like to have a system to receive information on their homeless members more directly when they need help. Common Cathedral is considering offering members identification cards or tags that instruct responders to contact Common Cathedral leaders if a homeless member is incapacitated.

Share Resources at Liturgies or Community Meals

Gatherings or outreaches that serve homeless people, such as a community meal, are good places to offer supplies that homeless people need before and during a disaster. The Episcopal Diocese of Colorado and Episcopal Relief & Development provided funding for provisions that Sandoval distributed during the first Common Cathedral gathering after the storm.

Distribute Supplies for Survival Year Round

Genty said the following supplies are essential to surviving on the streets in cold places such as Colorado, whether there is a disaster or not:

Wool socks, which are warmer and longer-lasting than cotton.

Lightweight one-to-two person sized tarps.

Sleeping bags.

Rope.

Food that is easy to carry and can be prepared without utilities. Genty suggest items that one might take on a backpacking trip.

Notes, cards, and letters with words of encouragement and comfort.

“The folks who live on the streets in general have to transport all of their worldly possessions with them wherever they go,” Genty said. “So imagine what that would mean if you or I had to do that. Additionally, access to things like electricity, hot water, batteries, etc. is usually very difficult and hard to find.”

Don't Overwhelm Outreach Groups with Donations

Before collecting or donating items for the homeless, contact groups that distribute them to make sure that they are needed and that the group has room to store the contributions.

“For us, during the floods, this turned out to be a huge challenge,” Genty said. “We have no church building and no offices, so Chris and I had to try to figure out how to store the donations at our homes and at the homes of several others. The natural instinct is to try to do something immediately, and there is certainly a need for that, but there is also a need for help and support weeks and months after the disaster has abated.”

The ministry routes financial donations through a dedicated account at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Fort Collins, which was set up for that purpose, said Genty, who also serves as deacon at St. Luke's.

“That way we have full financial accountability and responsibility, and folks have a tax deductible organization to which they can write their checks,” he said.

Welcome the Gifts of People on the Streets

People who would serve the homeless must “come in with the understanding that these folks are ... living out their lives with strength and courage and faith and survival resources.” Genty said. “We need to develop learning opportunities for partnership in times of crisis where both groups minister to each other.”

During the flood, members of the homeless community brought several gifts to the response effort, Genty said. Their willingness to look out for one another made it possible to locate missing members. Several helped remove mud and debris from homes that were flooded, and others volunteered with the Red Cross.

Work to Provide Safe, Secure Housing for the Homeless

Because people on the streets are most vulnerable to the hunger, cold and illness that can accompany a disaster, its essential to make sure proper shelter will be available to them.

The September floods occurred at a time when shelter was most limited in Longmont. In response, a network of churches that provides a rotating shelter October through April opened a month early to assist the homeless population.

In some cases, people who work with the homeless must be ready to advocate for their rights to stay in disaster shelters. Officially, people do not need to prove they have a permanent address to stay at a Red Cross shelter after a disaster. However, there have been reports of homeless people being turned away. During the September floods, people without permanent addresses were initially barred from the Red Cross shelter in Boulder, a practice that was quickly corrected after advocates complained.

A downloadable version of this article can be found at www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary

Back to Top

US Disaster Program Trains Dioceses in Preparedness and Response

In January, Diocesan Disaster Coordinators and team members from six Episcopal dioceses in the western US gathered with Episcopal Relief & Development staff in Albuquerque, NM, to learn more about how to expand their church-based disaster preparedness and response efforts.

Episcopal Relief & Development's US Disaster Program offers the regional Diocesan Disaster Coordinator trainings annually. Diocesan Disaster Coordinators are appointed by their bishops to help the diocese prepare for and respond to local disasters, supporting congregations as they prepare to protect their physical and human assets and help vulnerable people.

The January training, which included representatives from the dioceses of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, San Diego and Wyoming, was held at the Diocese of The Rio Grande's Bosque Center. Several other western dioceses will be attending Episcopal Relief & Development's Level 2 training later this year. Additionally three more regional trainings are planned through May.

Since 2011, Episcopal Relief & Development has trained coordinators and team members from 76 of the 99 Episcopal dioceses in the US. To find out if your diocese has a Disaster Coordinator see Episcopal Relief & Development's list of Diocesan Disaster Coordinators. Recheck it often, as the information is updated regularly. For more information contact Barb Ballenger at bballenger@episcopalrelief.org.

Back to Top

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