

WORK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE DISASTER RESPONSE

*“There is a saying in Tibetan, ‘Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength.’
No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is,
if we lose our hope, that’s our real disaster.”*
— The Dalai Lama

Hardly a week goes by without news of a natural or man-made disaster somewhere in the world. In fact, as I pen this column, our neighbors in the Bahamas are being besieged by Hurricane Dorian with Floridians and those on the East Coast preparing for her arrival.



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The human suffering associated with these events garners the attention of the international community. Through social media and news sources, we first see the struggles of victims to even survive, much less recover, and the commitment of aid workers also stirs us to action. For Catholic health ministry, our *Shared Statement of Identity for the Catholic Health Ministry* sums up how it is that we respond to such need, how we see these disasters and are moved with compassion. We answer God’s call to foster healing, act with compassion, and promote wellness for all persons and communities, with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved and most vulnerable. By our service, we strive to transform hurt into hope.

That’s a big statement—especially saying we strive to transform hurt into hope—and an ever-greater call to action in times of disaster. But as we all know, our first aim is to do no harm. And in our action, is there, too, a call to recognize the true need and desires of victims over our own preferred ways to help?

CHA typically receives requests as disasters occur: member organizations inquire about the possibility of a coordinated response; individuals hoping to assist the health facilities and communities impacted; and we hear from organizations or persons affected who seek aid. Although CHA is not a disaster response organization, in the past we have responded by sharing timely information,

providing links to trusted resources and making introductions to appropriate relief agencies. We also share precautions that should be taken into consideration at these critically important times.

But what might we need to do to serve our members in future disasters? CHA held a meeting at the CHRISTUS Health headquarters in 2018 to gather our members, partner organizations and disaster experts to share insights and lessons learned from disasters occurring primarily in 2017 and 2018. While it was an opportunity for our members to collectively discuss response challenges, protocols and policies, and even what went wrong or right, it also provided feedback to the Catholic health ministry about the need for more robust disaster response initiatives.

The meeting in Dallas highlighted several opportunities and since that time we have been working to detail potential opportunities. CHA does not intend to be a disaster response team or coordinate direct response activities, but we can serve as a facilitator. Here are some opportunities currently under consideration. I value your insights and hope that you will share any additions or questions by emailing me at bcompton@chausa.org.

ADVOCACY

- Support mission leaders and facility/system leadership advocating for additional attention to and investment in disaster preparedness, as a means to uphold their organizations’ missions.

- Create a disaster preparedness and response focus area within CHA.

GUIDANCE FOR ASSISTING IN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DISASTERS:

- Share normative and operational guidance for responding to disasters that directly affect our ministries.
- Create/share guidance for responding to disasters that are outside of our ministry/community borders.
- Create a decision matrix to assist in determining responses.
- Identify/develop and share templates for disaster communications.

CONVENING

- CHA has an opportunity to convene and facilitate a coordinated networking approach of its members with other federal, regional, state and local authorities, community actors and other members of the Catholic network, such as Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and others.
- We can host regional disaster meetings and conferences to facilitate networking and determine member coordination needs, starting with highly disaster-prone regions.

BECOME AN ADVISOR IN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

- Identify resources for members that help facilitate investments of time and resources in

disaster preparedness and infrastructure for disaster management.

- Identify appropriate participation in Catholic Charities USA's disaster preparedness and response training.

This work to further develop resources in disaster response also will identify existing guidelines and best practices, identify opportunities to convene members to share lessons learned and allow for networking. As necessary, we can develop and share tools and resources for member utilization.

CHA is exploring how it can best provide guidance to our members in the area of domestic disasters and also welcomes input on the disaster resources we currently provide on our webpages, webinars and meetings.

Our shared experiences in responding to disasters and discerning proposed response activities in light of ethical implications and their actual outcomes enables us to do what the Dalai Lama says: utilize tragedy as a “source of strength” and truly become agents who turn hurt unto hope for those impacted by disaster.

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Those who work in Catholic health care are compassionate people often compelled to provide help and hope to victims of disasters around the world. Below are a few reminders from CHA's online resources that are available to everyone.

Monetary contributions to established relief agencies are almost always the best way to help. Our financial contributions enable relief agencies to purchase exactly what they need when they need it, and they avoid the expense and environmental impact of transporting and storing donated goods. In addition, financial contributions can help revive the local economy by allowing the relief agencies to buy from local merchants.

Every disaster is unique and should be carefully tailored to population needs by relief professionals on the ground. These personnel

coordinate with each other, with government entities and with local groups to make accurate assessments of the needs and appropriate response.

Unsolicited, unneeded commodities are never required in early stages of response. These donations often compete with priority relief items and create unnecessary expenses related to transportation and storage. In addition, the needs evolve daily and therefore an unsolicited donation may not be useful when it arrives.

Many unofficial “relief campaigns and agencies” appear during disasters. Donations made to unregulated or disreputable agencies can be misallocated and/or fail to reach those in need because of the lack of expertise, relationships and cultural competence.

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