

# RESPONDING TO NATURAL DISASTERS

*We cannot wish that human beings were not subject to the forces of nature, including the mortality ... we cannot wish for the seas to dry up, that the waves grow still, that the tectonic plates cease to exist, that nature ceases to be beyond our abilities to predict and control ... But the terms of that nature include such catastrophe and suffering, which leaves us with sorrow as not a problem to be solved, but a fact. And it leaves us with compassion as the work we will never finish.*

— Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*

The year 2017 was expensive and deadly all over the planet. Wildfires scorched dry land from California to Portugal. Flooding from super-strength hurricanes and tropical storms devastated the United States and the Caribbean, mudslides, famine, earthquakes — it was a year with many a headline noting another natural disaster somewhere on Earth.



**BRUCE  
COMPTON**

These headlines — these times of disaster — often lead to phone calls, emails and hallway conversations among health care executives and employees who feel compelled to respond. And then, in some cases, those conversations lead to an email or phone call to me to discuss what the Catholic Health Association is doing or might be able to do in support of the disaster's

victims.

At a recent meeting of CHA's International Outreach Advisory Committee, the issue of response to natural disasters became a topic of intense discussion. I reported that our typical response as an association has been to provide links to CHA-developed prayers and the CHA resource *Disaster Response: Considerations for Catholic Health Care*. When appropriate, we also suggest that CHA members support partner organizations such as Catholic Relief Services or Catholic Charities USA, the church's agencies with deep roots in most of the countries that lately have been struck by disastrous natural phenomena. These agencies typically have on-the-ground people in place prior to the disaster, expertise and resources in place for disaster response.

During the conversation, committee members raised questions like these: How are decisions made about responding to disasters? When are

emails sent with special prayers or specific resources? What might the ministry be able to do to be more strategic and consistent in our responses? How might CHA help the ministry be more consistent in its response?

I must admit that although the discussion around these questions left my head full of the complexity of disaster response, the committee meeting also led me to open conversations and deliberations with others across the ministry, CRS, Catholic Charities and within CHA regarding appropriate next steps.

What became clear is that ministry responses to 2017's natural disasters here and overseas, as well as responses in previous years, offer us insights, lessons learned and tales of failures and successes. In the hope of responding most effectively in future, CHA will bring together its members and partners in disaster response to share their wisdom and warnings.

## SPECIAL GATHERING ON DISASTER RESPONSE

CHA is convening members on July 25-26 at the CHRISTUS Health offices in Irving, Texas, to provide a timely forum for sharing insights and lessons learned. This is not a training meeting or a detailed, step-by-step, how-to forum. This meeting will, instead, bring together those who have coordinated disaster responses, so that as a ministry, we can collectively learn from the "how" as well as highlight the "why" of response as a mission imperative.

Do we know if our good intentions led to good outcomes? Did we send unneeded items or unsolicited volunteers? What were we able to do during disaster response in the U.S. that might guide our actions when responding in low- and middle-income countries? We need to come to this gathering ready to discuss the realities.

The meeting will address the two types of natural disasters, both international and domestic, that we respond to as a ministry:

- Those involving community(s) that the organization directly serves
- Those that are not in the organization's direct service market but are communities we feel compelled to assist as part of our mission

Keynote presentations, panel forums and plenty of time for questions, comments and discussion should elicit robust conversation and sharing of information. The meeting also will provide ample networking time so

that CHA members can meet their colleagues from across the country, as well as our international partners.

This meeting is a gathering for those with international and domestic response information to share, as well as for key influencers and decision-makers, including operational and mission leaders, at the facility/regional/system levels.

The goal is for all of us to gain an even greater understanding of how response to a disaster can be effective and helpful — or how it can create a second disaster. Like me, you probably can recall hearing about clothing drives, donations of new and used “stuff” and even bottled-water collections — so-called “fill the trailer” pushes — meant to be of assistance to neighbors in need, only to learn the items weren't requested, weren't useful or created a mountain of trash that the affected community couldn't handle.

But this is also a gathering about

sharing inspiration. We will hear about successes — new disaster aid methods that work — and we will hear firsthand stories from and about associates in our ministries who, despite having family and property of their own in the ravaged areas, remained at their facilities and offered help and hope to those in their care.

We will raise and discuss all these topics and more — and determine if any next steps need to be taken. I hope that you will consider who from your ministry should join us, and **please note:** This topic has been deemed so important that there is **no registration fee for CHA members** to attend.

Our agenda and event information is available at [www.chausa.org/disasterresponsemtg](http://www.chausa.org/disasterresponsemtg).

**BRUCE COMPTON** is senior director, international outreach, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

YOU ARE INVITED

## When Disasters Strike: *A Special Convening for International & Domestic Response*

In response to recent disasters, CHA is convening members to share insights and lessons learned. This meeting will bring together those who have coordinated responses so that as a ministry we can collectively learn from the “how,” and highlight the “why” of response as a mission imperative.

July 25-26, 2018 in Irving, Texas  
Omni Mandalay Hotel at Las Colinas and CHRISTUS Health

Registration is FREE for CHA Members.



Learn more at  
[www.chausa.org/disasterresponsemtg](http://www.chausa.org/disasterresponsemtg)



JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

[www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org)

# HEALTH PROGRESS®

---

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, May - June 2018  
Copyright © 2018 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---