

You're in another part of the country...

Five Ways You Can Help Disaster Victims

By Bascombe J. Wilson, CEM
Emergency Response Director, DERA International

1. Cash donation to established relief agencies is **ALWAYS** the most useful immediate response to disasters by people outside the affected area.

Cash contributions allow relief organizations to immediately purchase exactly what is most urgently needed by disaster victims and to deliver this critical aid quickly.

Unlike donations of goods, your cash donations help immediately and require no transportation cost or delay. Cash donations allow relief supplies to be purchased very quickly at locations near to the disaster site.

Supplies, particularly food and clothing, can almost always be purchased near the impacted area—even in very extreme disasters. The problem is almost never a lack of food and clothing, but a lack of distribution within the immediate disaster area.

Unrequested shipments only slow down the already burdened distribution system and may actually delay receipt of critically needed aid by consuming limited supplies of fuel along the disaster supply route and adding greatly to traffic congestion.

Unrequested shipments can do more harm than good.

When relief teams have the funds to purchase food and other supplies close to the disaster area, they are able to stimulate local economies that have been seriously hurt by disaster while greatly reducing transportation and storage costs for diverse loads coming in from across the country.

It is almost never helpful to send used clothing and furniture to a disaster area unless there is a specific request from a specific response organization for specific items.

Cash contributions to legitimate relief agencies are always more helpful than the donation of collected items.

2. If you do ship items to a disaster area, confirm that the items in your shipment are exactly what's needed most.

Confirm exact needs by checking with a relief organization that has teams working in the disaster area. **NEVER SEND ANYTHING THEY DO NOT SPECIFICALLY REQUEST.** Always inquire about what is needed and do not make guesses. *Honor any promises you make to the very best of your ability.*

Unneeded items compete with priority items for transportation, storage and management.

In most cases, donations of canned goods and used clothing are never appropriate unless specifically requested by a specific relief agency in a very unusual situation. You can help more by donating the money you would otherwise have spent on shipment of collected goods.

Shipping bottled water, canned food, diapers and other collected items from distant areas is highly inefficient and is a serious waste of resources. Resist the temptation! There are better ways to help.

If you collect items that are not needed, sell them locally to raise disaster relief funds, donate them to a local charity or give them to local people in need. SEND NOTHING TO THE DISASTER AREA THAT ISN'T SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED BY A SPECIFIC RELIEF ORGANIZATION.

DO NOT WASTE YOUR EFFORTS AND RESOURCES PROVIDING THE WRONG KIND OF HELP!

3. Deliver items only to organizations requesting them.

Distributing relief supplies equitably to disaster victims requires infrastructure, extensive personnel and financial resources within the affected area.

To efficiently distribute relief commodities, an extensive system of staff, warehouses, vehicles, inventory control systems and communications networks are required. It is not enough to gather supplies and send them to an affected region; a sound partnership with a reliable local agency having transportation, inventory management and delivery capacity is mandatory.

Immediately after a disaster, many local organizations will spontaneously begin collecting food, clothing and other items with the commendable aim of sending them for disaster relief.

Usually, it costs disaster relief agencies more money to warehouse, manage and transport donated goods than it would have cost them to buy new items locally.

It is not unusual for community groups to collect several thousands of pounds of relief supplies and drive them to a disaster area only to find it difficult to find a responsible organization willing to accept delivery.

Almost always, it is better for those collecting donated goods to auction them off locally, thereby generating cash which can best assist the relief effort without incurring transportation, storage and distribution cost.

4. Volunteer if you are trained and have needed skills.

Outside volunteers are often frustrated when they try to find meaningful assignments during a disaster.

This is true even for highly skilled and professionally qualified volunteers such as doctors, nurses, morticians, firefighters, engineers and police officers arriving as individual volunteers from other parts of the country.

Resources are strained during a disaster, and another person arriving from the outside--particularly if they were not expected--can often be a considerable burden to on-scene managers.

Usually, your time and effort would be better spent volunteering in your local area for a charity or disaster relief organization while preparing yourself for the next major event. The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, humane societies and other local charities almost always need more local volunteers.

In many U.S. communities, local fire departments and emergency management offices sponsor **Community Emergency Response Teams, or CERTs**. Look into joining the training program for your local CERT, or talk with local officials about starting a CERT, Volunteers in Police Support (VIPS), or Fire Corps team in your area. *There will always be future disasters and your preparedness efforts now will pay off during the next emergency.*

Don't feel frustrated that you can't help now. Look to the long term! Prepare yourself for the next situation.

We all want to help following a disaster. Despite our own feelings of urgency, we need to help in the most beneficial way and be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

5. Help with Long-Term Recovery and Restoration

Communities and families will need assistance long after the immediate crisis has passed and the disaster has slipped into memory for the rest of the world.

To take personal action that will be of lasting help, DERA suggests the following:

- 1. Make cash contributions to relief organizations part of your routine...and be especially generous following major disasters.**
- 2. Once a disaster crisis has passed, contact local chapters of relief organizations involved in long term recovery (Habitat for Humanity, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Humane Society of the U.S., Feed the Children, Points of Light Foundation, AmeriCares, among many, many others) and inquire how you can best help.**
 - Cash contributions will be needed for two or three years after a major disaster and these organizations will probably have unfilled volunteer needs that you may be able to provide.
 - Contact different organizations until you find one in need of your services.
 - If you're eager to help and just can't find any other way to volunteer, send an email to volunteer@disasters.org and tell DERA what you want to do and how to contact you. DERA will make every effort to have one of our disaster response partners contact you.
- 3. Large numbers of outside volunteers as well as systematic collection and delivery of commodities may be most helpful during long term recovery after a disaster. Always work through an established national charity, an organization you know and respect or a trustworthy community group within the impacted area to be sure your assistance is used properly.**

Special Note for Corporations and Businesses

The National Emergency Resource Registry is the single best place for companies and private sector entities to list products or services they wish to make available in support of recovery efforts. The registry is accessible at <https://www.swern.gov>

Following major disasters in the U.S., provisions of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) may be implemented. Under EMAC, prospective donors of goods and services are often encouraged to contact their HOME STATE'S Office of Emergency Management and register their offer with the "ESF-15" Donations Management Staff.

On disasters of a smaller scale, it is usually best to contact the Office of Emergency Management of the affected state and register your offer with "ESF-15," the Donations Management Staff.

Major donations of bulk, delivered commodities are welcomed by relief agencies. Contact the donations management staff at the agency's national headquarters to see how your donation can best be used.

Want to learn more about disaster preparedness and response?

Visit <http://www.disasters.org>

This paper is based on research conducted by David Callahan, Volunteers in Technical Assistance (VITA) whose original work has been used extensively, and on guidance provided by the National Donations Steering Committee, the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), the Center for International Disaster Information (CIDI), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). While the author believes that the information is reasonably correct and accurate, neither the author nor DERA assumes any liability for the use of this information nor its accuracy, completeness or applicability. Always confirm the latest guidance on this matter with your state Office of Emergency Management or NVOAD point of contact.

This talking paper is directed to persons outside the immediate disaster area and is not intended to imply that anyone should hesitate to give immediate aid to individuals in need, or that the sharing of food, water and clothing within the affected area is inappropriate when it is clear that there is an immediate need.