

Disaster Response for Volunteers

Your neighbors and community need volunteers to assist, and you are prepared to help. Whether you are going into a disaster area to help rescue victims or restore vital needs, observe several precautions. In a situation so full of emotions, do what you can to help victims without hampering other volunteers or disaster workers. There are a few key items to observe.

Where possible, coordinate your efforts to contribute to the community effort. It is essential that volunteers support and contribute to recovery, not burden the strained resources.

Many volunteers are not trained rescue personnel, but all emergency workers follow a vital rescue principle: Your personal safety is your most important concern. Don't put yourself in a dangerous position where you could become a victim because medical personnel and facilities are already taxed to the limit. Precious efforts to locate missing persons or care for disaster victims will be diluted if you become injured. An injured person can't be of assistance to others, including caring for his or her family. Also, any injury will take you and others away from your tasks.

Here are pointers to enhance your effectiveness as a volunteer:

- Downed power lines should be given a wide berth. You can be electrocuted as the result of voltage transmitted by water or soil. Dangerous voltages may be encountered more than 10 yards from downed "hot" power lines. Allow electric utility company workers and trained electricians to handle all electrical-related hazards.
- Be alert to identify natural gas or LP gas leaks. If you smell mercaptan and know how to close the valve to the natural gas supply, do so immediately. Close the LP gas valve at the supply tank, unless heat may potentially cause an LP gas tank rupture that could endanger you. Make sure everyone stays a safe distance upwind and immediately contact the gas supplier if it isn't wise or obvious how to stop the gas leak.
- Respect all areas that are cordoned off.
- Don't park where traffic will be blocked.
- Buildings in areas with damaged structures shouldn't be entered until they have been thoroughly inspected by experienced construction personnel. Cleanup and repair can proceed in buildings that are determined safe for entry.
- Debris may be in unstable piles. Avoid them to prevent nasty falls, cuts and injury from nails, broken glass, etc.
- Experienced chain saw operators should clear downed trees. All those working in the area moving brush should understand the dangers of chain saws and falling trees. Alert people around you to respect chain saw operators, because they cannot hear and may not see an approaching individual.
- Providing clean water and food, as well as ice during warm weather, is critical. If you can bring enough to share with victims and disaster workers until power and potable water are restored, you have given vital aid. It is wise to take available first aid supplies with you so you can provide an initial antiseptic treatment, if it is needed.
- Where traffic lights aren't working, you should drive with courtesy and caution. Heavy construction equipment, military equipment, ATVs and four-wheel-drive vehicles may be in use. Be alert and respect them. All kinds of equipment may be moving to clear the way and rebuild vital infrastructure.
- Be alert around habitat for, and avoid, poisonous snakes and other displaced vermin seeking food and water after the disaster.

Assistance providing shelter and clothing to victims will give comfort during ice storms, flash floods or other disasters. A friendly, neighborly response during the first few days meets an essential need until other help, donations, etc., arrive.