

## How to Use Your House of Worship in a Disaster

Your facility may be needed as a shelter, service center, warehouse, or volunteer staging area during a response and recovery operation. Adapting your facility in a way that is consistent with your capabilities, and aligns with your mission and other programs, takes advance planning and close coordination with emergency management, human service networks and public health officials.

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### MITIGATION & PREPAREDNESS

**Mitigation** - The action of preventing or reducing the severity of a disaster's impact on your facility and community

- **Plan** for existing and expanded human services. If your disaster plan calls for maintaining ongoing programs, ensure you account for the human, material and facility resources you may need to support them.  
(See **NYDIS Disaster Tip Sheet “Continuity of Operations Planning: Ritual and Human Services Post-Disaster.”**)
- **Take inventory of your facilities and special equipment:**
  - Electrical and plumbing configurations – generators, lighting, outlets, pipes, shut-off valve, wiring, etc.
  - All assets including those outside your community (Local assets may not be usable or ideal location for certain operations, such as staging areas and warehouses.)
  - Physical stability or other limitations of your building(s)
  - Type of space and square footage of areas you could offer
  - Building codes and occupancy limits including handicap access
  - Commercial kitchens with non-perishable and perishable **food items and storage**
  - Adequate water, heat and cooling ability for your physical plant
  - Accessible bathroom and shower capacity
- **Coordinate** with:
  - Your **CERT Teams, Citizen Corps, Medical Reserve Corps and VOAD**. Identify what their facility needs will be during disasters and recovery operations.
  - **Houses of worship and other organizations in your neighborhood**. Consider planning to combine programs/religious services in order to make space available for a recovery operations and essential human services
  - Specific **disaster response and recovery organizations** (see below)
  - Local **disaster interfaith or national disaster recovery office**. Identify what their facility needs will be during disasters and recovery operations; identify what volunteer capacity you can offer their operations.
- **Consider which vulnerable populations you are uniquely positioned to serve** (i.e. those with a particular type of disability or medical issue, or those from a specific culture, or age group)
- **Secure written agreements** and memoranda of understanding (MOU's). Clarify each party's human services and recovery responsibilities, address liability issues, etc.
- **Ensure physical access** and other **accommodations for the disabled and the elderly**

### RESPONSE & RECOVERY

- **Consider the extent to which your house of worship has been affected** by the disaster and evaluate your ability to go safely forward with your plans. Think about:
  - **Impact on people** - yourself and family, key leadership, support personnel.
  - **Damage to facilities and equipment**, availability of back-up sites, etc.
- **Activation & Needs Assessment** (Note: Your plans should detail exactly how the use of your resources will be triggered):
  - **Confirm the need** for deployment of your resources with the appropriate organization.
  - If your resources have not been requested, **thoroughly assess post-disaster conditions** to ensure that resources you wish to share are indeed needed.
- **Coordinate** both with your neighborhood and local government agencies or volunteers networks (VOAD).
- **Consider “radical hospitality.”** A compelling need that does not fit into your existing plan may present itself. Consider it. Sometimes the right thing to do is not necessarily comfortable or well-suited to your facility or mission.
- **Be flexible and adapt to changing needs.** Consider both how needs for physical resources will change through the recovery process, and how your congregation's needs will change.

**WAYS TO USE YOUR FACILITY DURING DISASTER RESPONSE & RECOVERY**

Please note that comments regarding “considerations” are general in nature. Basic elements such as appropriate number of restrooms should be considered for all uses. Always coordinate with your VOAD as well as the specific organizations listed.

<b>Disaster Uses for Your Building</b>	<b>General Considerations</b>	<b>Coordination Organization</b>
Headquarters for your faith community's disaster recovery programs	Requirements will vary depending on size of operation.	Your denomination or faith community's national recovery office director
Safe space; area for prayer/meditation, emotional and spiritual care	Many types of spaces will work; ensure adequate private space.	Neighboring houses of worship; disaster interfaiths or chaplaincy networks
Disaster-related funerals: It is possible that one or two houses of worship could have the largest percentage of disaster-related funerals.	Consider how to create a welcoming physical space for those that may not be of your denomination/faith tradition.	Other houses of worship, hospitals and medical examiners office. Medical Reserve Corps or Health Department
Disaster Assistance Service Center (DASC)	Large spaces with capability of supporting many computers, etc.	Office of Emergency Management (OEM)
Respite Center for workers	Large spaces; consider access to food, space for private sessions.	OEM; American Red Cross Chapter, or your local volunteer center
Space for liturgical services & special events	Many types of space will work.	Neighborhood houses of worship, and events of other community organizations
Volunteer staging and training area	Assess proximity to work areas.	Volunteer centers
Reception Centers - Temporary spaces for displaced victims to receive basic services, refreshments, re-assurance, information, use of restrooms, etc.	Requires relatively large space; tables & chairs; restrooms.	American Red Cross Chapters, OEM or disaster interfaith - Emergency Rest Centers are used during large scale evacuations and events
Cooling Center (during heat emergencies)	Requires large space with air conditioning that could be open to the public.	OEM or your Health Department
Fixed Feeding Station/or places where organizations can produce meals	Requires large kitchen and possibly dining area.	American Red Cross Chapters, The Salvation Army, VOAD
Housing for work and service groups from other congregations	Requires sleeping accommodations.	Your denomination or faith community's national recovery office director
Meeting space for various human services functions	Many types of space will work.	VOAD, OEM, human services network
Community Information Meetings, where organizations can present what assistance is available and how to get it	Requires large open area.	American Red Cross chapters, OEM or your local human service network
Sheltering (See NDIN Tip Sheet “Faith Communities & Disaster Sheltering”)	Requires sleeping accommodations with adequate bathroom and feeding facilities.	American Red Cross chapters and their national partners

**RESOURCES: Contact Information for Organizations Listed Above**

- **American Red Cross — Preparing to Get Training:** [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- **Church World Service — Community Arise Curriculum:** [www.communityarise.com](http://www.communityarise.com)
- **ERD — Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations & Parishes:** [www.e-rd.org/resourcelibrary](http://www.e-rd.org/resourcelibrary)
- **National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Training & Tip Sheets for U.S. Religious Leaders :** [www.n-din.org](http://www.n-din.org)
- **National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD):** [www.nvoad.org](http://www.nvoad.org)
- **New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS):** [www.nydis.org](http://www.nydis.org)
- **Guide — Church World Service: Guide to Disaster Ministry in Your Congregation**
- **Toolkit — Bloomington Public Health: Ready, Set, Go! Faith Community Emergency Preparedness Toolkit**

## Faith Communities & Disaster Sheltering

Houses of worship are uniquely positioned to assist the American Red Cross and other partners with sheltering during evacuations or when disasters cause significant housing loss. While some traditional shelter locations (like schools) must revert to their original function early on, houses of worship can support long-term housing needs in culturally appropriate ways.

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Evacuation should be addressed as part of everyone's planning efforts. Through the media and direct warning systems, officials will tell you when to evacuate, and whether to leave the area or go to an Evacuation Center or Shelter. Evacuation shelters should be used as a last resort when you are unable to shelter with family or friends.

### TO BECOME A DISASTER SHELTER FOR CONGREGATIONS OR THE PUBLIC...

#### DO AN ALL-HAZARDS ASSESSMENT OF YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP & FACILITIES:

- **How much/many large space/s do you have?** The American Red Cross uses a guide of 20 to 40 square feet per person to estimate capacity. Also, check with your insurance carrier and local fire department—adhere to local building codes.
- **How many smaller areas/offices could be used?** Do you have specialized areas such as a day-care room and office?
- **How many restrooms and showers are available?**
- **What about kitchen facilities?** Do you have a commercial kitchen? How many meals can be prepared there? Are there restrictions on who can use the kitchen? Can you prepare meals according to religious dietary restrictions?
- Are your building and bathrooms **accessible for people with disabilities**?
- What type of **equipment/supplies** and services are available: public address systems, generators, recreation equipment?
- **All-hazards considerations.** Consider what hazards your facility may be vulnerable to, for instance:
  - **Is your building in a flood or storm surge zone?** Find out from your local emergency management office.
  - Does the designated dorm space have **exposed windows** (making it inappropriate as a hurricane or tornado shelter)?

#### CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- **Under what circumstances would you like to offer your space?** For disasters in your neighborhood? For larger-scale community-wide disasters? Or as an evacuation staging area?
- **What other programs use your building?** How will an agreement to use your house of worship as a shelter affect them? Can you provide a **24-hour contact for access** to your house of worship?
- **Who from your staff will remain on-site during shelter operations?** Who is their back-up?
- Does your house of worship **insurance policy** cover shelter operations?

**DON'T FORGET:**  
Plan for the sheltering needs of household pets.

#### IF YOU DECIDE TO OFFER YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP AS A DISASTER SHELTER:

- **Contact your local American Red Cross chapter** to discuss specifics about your house of worship. You may be asked to fill out a site survey or host a walk-through. If you would like to apply to be a Red Cross shelter, there are a number of options including becoming a Red Cross Shelter, Partner Shelter, or Supported Shelter. These options vary in terms of Red Cross staff and resources provided. For more information, visit [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) or call 1.877.REDCROSS.
- **Sign an agreement that includes:**
  - Reimbursement for damages, liability issues, and a process for turning your facility over to you when it is deactivated.

#### SPONTANEOUS SHELTERING (RARELY A GOOD IDEA):

- **During a crisis, people may naturally come to your house of worship. Here are some tips on what to do:**
- **Make contact with the American Red Cross**, which will be able to help you get information regarding the disaster and possibly additional resources. If an overnight facility is needed, call the Red Cross or check their online National Shelter System to locate a more formal shelter facility that may be better suited.
- **If individuals must stay at your house of worship overnight:**
  - **Think of safety** and of meeting basic needs – food, water, blankets, comfort. Look to congregation members for help.
  - Make efforts to get **updated information** and share it with shelter residents. Seek news from TV, radio, internet, etc.
  - **Inventory and prioritize** use of your supplies.
  - **Be proactive in identifying needs** that may arise (baby supplies, e.g.), and tap into available community resources.

**OTHER WAYS YOU CAN SUPPORT DISASTER SHELTERING:**

- **Provide volunteers**
  - Encourage members of your **house of worship to get training to manage and staff other American Red Cross shelters**, or your own facility (see below). Encourage your congregants to become American Red Cross shelter volunteers. ([www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).)
- **Provide support services**
  - Extend your existing services to shelter populations. Especially consider this if you have complementary expertise such as child care services, pregnancy services, recreation specialists, language and culture expertise, etc.
  - **Disaster Chaplains are often needed in shelters.** NDIN offers Disaster Chaplaincy training and services anywhere in the U.S. [www.n-din.org](http://www.n-din.org)
- **Provide expertise particular to your faith community**
  - Even if you are unable to offer your facility or provide volunteers, discuss sheltering in your neighborhood with your local American Red Cross. You can offer advice on how to offer services that are culturally appropriate and/or suggest other neighborhood resources to support sheltering.

**Know Your Limits:**

Be aware of your physical and location capabilities, even if you do not plan on using your facility as a shelter. People may come to your house of worship during a crisis. Check to see if your facility is in a tornado prone area, a flood plain or a hurricane evacuation zone.

**HURRICANE SHELTER PLANNING:**

- **Hurricane shelters are situated away from areas where storm surge (high water) is likely to occur.** They provide basic food and water. For large-scale events, cots and blankets and other supports are available only on a limited basis. Other supportive services are planned for disaster shelters that are open longer than a few days.
- **When an evacuation is ordered**, either in anticipation of a disaster or immediately after an unanticipated event happens, shelters will open to accommodate displaced residents who have no other place to go.
- **To learn more about Evacuation Zones** and where to find the Evacuation Center nearest to your house of worship, check with your local emergency management office.

**SHELTERING-IN-PLACE:**

Sometimes, officials may recommend that people “shelter-in-place” rather than evacuate. This is likely to occur if there is a release (intentionally or unintentionally) of biological, chemical, or radiological materials into the air. The idea behind sheltering-in-place is to put a physical barrier between yourself and the matter that is in the air. Some steps you can take if this occurs:

- **Listen for instructions** from officials.
- **Seal off any openings in your home**, such as windows and doors; use masking tape and/or plastic sheeting.
- **Move to an interior space** above the ground floor.

**To learn more about sheltering-in-place** and what you can do when this occurs, read the American Red Cross’ “Shelter-in-Place” fact sheet at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org): Go to Disaster Services, then navigate to Be Prepared, and click on “Shelter-in-Place.” Visit the your local emergency management office website for more information.

**Emergency Rest Centers** are houses of worship that train their members to provide for basic human needs, respite and urgent news during an evacuation or disaster.

**American Red Cross—National Shelter System**

The ARC National Shelter System has a new online locator for open shelters. This is a Google map that is automatically updated every 30 minutes with open shelter locations and population information from ARC chapters around the country. You can search for the nearest open shelter at any time, by address, city, state or zip code. ARC has thousands of possible shelter locations around the country and this map allows anyone to find shelters that are currently open because of an emergency situation, including evacuations.

**Search for Open American Red Cross Shelters Online at: <http://www.redcross.org/nss/>**



Disaster Services

**OTHER RESOURCES**

- **AHA—Shelter Training:** <http://www.americanhumane.org/animals/professional-resources/>
- **ARC—Chemical/Radiation Shelter-in-Place:** [www.redcross.org/preparedness/cdc\\_english/Sheltering.asp](http://www.redcross.org/preparedness/cdc_english/Sheltering.asp)
- **FEMA—Ready American, Shelter-in-Place Resources:** <http://www.ready.gov/america/makeaplan/stayingput.html>
- **National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Emergency Rest Center Training:** [www.n-din.org](http://www.n-din.org)

See [www.prepare.org](http://www.prepare.org) and [www.ready.gov/america](http://www.ready.gov/america) to obtain shelter preparedness materials that address planning for people with disabilities and other special needs, seniors, children, schools, and pet owners.