



How Can You Help When Disaster Strikes?

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In response to an e-mail from the International Code Council (ICC) advertising the course “Disaster Preparedness Training,” several calls came in to RCI requesting information about how members can assist after a disaster. While the course advertised by ICC is designed for code officials, there are many ways for members to get involved, both in paid positions and as volunteers.

Natural disasters can be devastating to a community. Depending on the disaster and its severity, local resources can be stretched beyond their capacity. That’s why it is important for communities to bring in additional resources to help with response, recovery, and rebuilding a community.

The first step after a disaster is to rescue citizens who need assistance—evacuating the disaster site, rendering first aid, and transporting them to hospitals and shelters. These helpers are called “first responders” and typically include EMS, National Guard, search and rescue teams, and law enforcement. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides urban search and rescue teams to affected areas. State and local emergency management departments respond to calls for assistance with evacuation, transport, urgent medical care, and rescue. Search and rescue operations consist of locating victims, rescue (extrication), and initial medical stabilization of individuals trapped in confined spaces—usually as a result of structural collapse. Training for these teams is intensive; the work is dangerous and requires hundreds of hours of training, aside from the requirement to be a certified medical technician.

The Red Cross is one of the first organizations to respond after a disaster, distributing needed supplies and food, and providing shelter to displaced residents. Did you know that 95% of Red Cross disaster workers are volunteers? For more information about volunteering with the Red Cross, go to: <http://www.redcross.org/support/volunteer>. Also, check with your local or state emergency management departments to find ways volunteers are utilized by emergency management teams in your area.

Immediately following the disaster, FEMA begins working to map the areas affected. Satellite images are utilized to define the outer edges of the affected areas. Then FEMA, along with state personnel and the Civil Air Patrol, will fly over the area to take a closer look. This information aids first responders to assist the hardest-hit areas first and fan out from there; later the maps are used for damage assessment and mapping the entire damage field. Disasters may be declared at the local, state, or federal level.

Governors may request the President to declare disasters in particular areas that will, if declared disasters, be eligible for individual (individuals), public (state and local governments), and/or hazard mitigation assistance. FEMA then mobilizes teams comprised of federal, state, and local government personnel to conduct preliminary damage assessments. “The Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA) process is a mechanism used to determine the impact and magnitude of damage and resulting needs of individuals, businesses, [the] public sector, and [the] community as a whole. Information collected is used by the state as

a basis for the governor’s request for a major disaster or emergency declaration, and by the President in determining a response to the governor’s request.”¹ Guidelines are established to assist the President; however, the President has the ultimate decision.

In addition to teams performing damage assessments, FEMA Mitigation Assessment Teams (MATs) are sent into the field to inspect buildings and related structures. These teams perform some forensic engineering to determine causes of structural failures and successes. MATs will make recommendations to state and local governments, building code organizations, and the construction industry to reduce future damage. Members of the team typically include representatives of FEMA, state and local officials, and public and private sector expert representatives such as architects, engineers, the building construction industry, and building code and enforcement professionals. If you are an architect or engineer, check to see if your state has enacted Good Samaritan laws that will provide immunity from civil liability during a time of disaster. Skills needed for these teams are hazard-resistant design and construction, building codes, historic preservation, and structural engineering, among others. Qualified individuals are listed in a FEMA database from which teams are selected in the event of a disaster. For more information on this program, go to: <http://www.fema.gov/what-mitigation-assessment-team-program#2>. RCI contacted FEMA and plans to meet in Washington, DC, to discuss ways our members can be involved with FEMA.

Another way to assist FEMA and


your community is through Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). The CERT program “educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace following an event when professional responders are not immediately available to help. CERT members also are encouraged to support emergency response agencies by taking a more active role in emergency preparedness projects in their community.”² For information on this program and how to start one in your community, go to: <http://www.fema.gov/cert-program-registration-information>.

After the response and recovery phases, the rebuilding of homes and communities begins. There are a multitude of organizations that work in many ways to rebuild a community. One of those organizations is the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD). “NVOAD is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based

organization that builds resiliency in communities nationwide. It serves as the forum where organizations share knowledge and resources throughout the disaster cycle—preparation, response, recovery and mitigation—to help disaster survivors and their communities.”³

Members of NVOAD service-oriented organizations are faith-based, community-based, and other nonprofits who rely on volunteers to provide services. NVOAD can be located at: <http://www.nvoad.org/>. The website provides links to all member webpages and provides a comprehensive list of disaster relief organizations. Faith-based organizations include Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Disaster Ministries, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, the Jewish Foundation, Islamic Relief, and Samaritan’s Purse. Nonprofit organizations include the Humane Society, Habitat for Humanity, Rebuilding Together, Hope Force, and Headwaters Relief Organization. Each organization has its own volunteering requirements and training. Network for Good and Hands On Network are similar organizations and need volunteers. The websites are <http://www1.networkforgood.org/> and <http://www.handsonnetwork.org/>, respectively.

Also, the ICC provides an opportunity for building safety professionals to volunteer to assist with damage assessments, building inspections, and other code-related functions in a community. Upon request, ICC furnishes a list of volunteers to any jurisdiction seeking assistance. The jurisdiction will review the list, skill set, and capabilities, and will then contact volunteers, if needed. If you are interested in volunteering, please call ICC at 888-ICC-SAFE (888-422-7233), ext. 5238.

If you or your company gets involved in community outreach—disaster-related or otherwise—please inform us. RCI is interested in the community efforts our members provide as building envelope consultants and applauds you for your service. 

FOOTNOTES

1. FEMA, “Preliminary Damage Assessment for Texas – Severe Storms, Tornadoes, Straight-Line Winds, and Flooding, May 29, 2015.
2. <http://www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams>.
3. <http://www.nvoad.org/about-us/>.

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