

TORNADOES

by Cliff Joplin

DO-IT-YOURSELF RELIEF OPERATIONS... WHAT WE DID

New Creation Church of Joplin, Missouri

(Based on our experience after the worst tornado to hit the United States in 60 Years)

BACKGROUND:

The tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri on May 22, 2011 destroyed 8,000 homes, 550 businesses, 30 churches, 8 schools, 2 fire stations, a major regional hospital and 161 precious lives. "Ground zero" was just three blocks from New Creation Church. In the wake of that disaster we launched more than 10,000 relief/recovery teams from our site, housed more than 8,000 volunteers, distributed hundreds of truckloads of food, water, clothing, furniture and supplies, built nearly 100 high quality storage sheds, held 25 block parties to encourage the neighborhood, and created a three-day-a-week after school ministry for more than 100 children.

WHEN THE CRISIS HIT:

Immediately following our tornado people were in shock. Being located on the edge of "Ground Zero" with thousands suffering and more tornados on the way we had to think fast. Here are some of the first steps that we took:

- We immediately sent our youth group to the neighborhood letting people know that we were open as a storm shelter.
- Within 24 hours we set-up PAY PAL on our website to begin receiving contributions. As quickly as we could we put up lists of needs on our website as well as directions for volunteers.
- Having 24,000 square feet of space we opened our facility to displaced people and incoming volunteers for overnight "accommodations."
- We set up a desk operation at the front door that helped to direct the suffering and the volunteer. It was important to have trustworthy people at the front desk as this served as a vital security check point. For the first six months we had 24/7 coverage at this check point.
- The spirit and tone that we set with incoming people was very important. We were quick to offer comfort and love to those who were suffering as well as deep gratitude to all who were volunteering. We worked with anyone and everyone of good spirit.
- As supplies arrived we accepted everything that came our way... we needed it all!
- We set up a kitchen operation right away with volunteers who prepared 3 meals a day for people who were hungry. At first our volunteers brought food from home, but we quickly had all kinds of contributions.
- On the third day after the tornado a man showed up at the door who said that he coordinated the relief effort in Stockton, Missouri several years earlier. His advice proved to be vital for our entire operation. We owe a great deal of gratitude for Randy's help. He was an angel from God!

THINKING LIKE A BUSINESS:

- The first bit of advice that our "mentor" offered was that we had to start thinking strategically like a business. We needed to determine what our scope of operation would be. Because of our proximity to the worst of the damage we determined that we would prepare to offer relief and recovery services for the long haul. Initially we focused on

providing meals, overnight accommodations, distribution supplies and directions for volunteers.

- The pastor fired himself as the director of relief operations and began to hire staff. Our mentor suggested that donations would come in to cover those costs. We eventually hired five full-time staff and twenty-five part-time staff with an additional ten to fifteen volunteer staff who stayed for three months or more. All staff were given limitations on their time of employment. Most of our hires were excellent in the first few months. We made a two or three mistakes, however, in our hiring haste. Sadly, we paid dearly for these mistakes.
- Every room in our facility was evaluated for use and diagrams were made to identify where different distribution items would be stored, volunteers would sleep and various administrative duties would be carried out.
- We quickly purchased a new phone system and, although it was a royal challenge, we had the phone company add another line.
- For incoming volunteers we required them to sign off on an agreement covenant as well as a liability release. We gave individuals and groups instructions for helping us keep the facility clean. We had such a variety of people in and out of the building it would have been wise for us to provide neon wrist bands for those staying with us. This would have helped to establish better security.
- In the area of distribution we requested donors to provide as much shelving as possible. We set-up room after room with different items... food, clothing, cleaning supplies, tools, and water (never stack water more than six cases high... things can get damp fast). We quickly learned that water should be stacked under tarps outside so that people could grab them and go. We had more water than we could imagine. The most difficult items to manage was the used clothing. Our army of volunteers labeled, folded and organized day after day... after three or four months, however, we shut down our clothing operation... it was too labor intensive. Our space usage morphed and changed sometimes on a daily basis until we could get the most effective arrangement and flow. FLOW IS IMPORTANT!
- Our dining area was a great place for building relationships and encouraging volunteers. We set things up as a buffet. Most people were very good about sharing, recycling, and cleaning up after themselves. Most of the time, groups that were coming in would offer assistance in the kitchen.

SPECIFIC ITEMS WE NEEDED EARLY ON TO FUNCTION MORE EFFECTIVELY (most of these were donated):

- We needed various sized chainsaws. Initially, we thought we would need to buy 25, but we quickly realized that we would only need 4-5 with the number of outsiders bringing in this sort of equipment. We bought only Stihl and Echo products.
- We needed new toilets in much of our aging facility along with someone to install them.
- We needed freezers with an electrician to assist with wiring as to not overload the circuits.
- We needed three large event grills which proved invaluable.
- We needed extra tables and chairs of the light weight variety.

- We needed an ice machine in order to avoid brining in 50-100 bags of ice each day.
- We needed coolers on wheels to send out with groups in the field.
- We needed heavy duty shelving on wheels that could be moved from place to place (for a time we settled on used shelving from an old Walmart, but this was difficult to manage).
- We needed several two wheel dollies. This made moving bottled water and other distribution items much more simple.
- We needed grocery carts to help with distribution orders. A local store gave us several.
- We needed showers installed. This wasn't easy to do thanks to the odd configuration of our facility... even so we made it work (before we installed showers we directed people to the YMCA or shower trailers that were set up at some sites).
- We needed washers and dryers.

COMMEMORATE/CELEBRATE:

- Four days after the tornado a group set-up a cross in our sanctuary made out of debris from the crisis. It still stands today as a reminder of God's grace, mercy and love in the wake of perhaps the most horrifying event of our lives.
- We set-up a map of the United States with pins for people to identify where they came from. Every state in the union had a pin along with at least eight other countries were represented.
- We set-up a public journal for victims and volunteers to share their experiences.
- We posted all letters and posters from children and groups around the nation.
- We sent a framed piece of calligraphy "Jars of Clay" by Holly Monroe to our most significant supporters... some of these churches sent as many as 60 teams of people to help. Those relationships became very precious to us!
- Take a lot of pictures... make sure volunteers transfer their pics to you... it will save time. We originally wanted to put many of these pictures up on our wall for incoming groups to see, but realized that for many of the people from Joplin in our facility this created too much pain.
- We held a Christmas party for all paid and unpaid staff. It was a grand celebration!

WORKING WITH FEMA

- FEMA was very helpful to work with it was understood that they work for the people not the people for them!
- Be sure to RECORD ALL HOURS WORKED BY STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS. Each hour is worth between \$18 and \$36 that is ultimately contributed to your city. These hours should be recorded daily with the workers name, address, phone number, age, skill level (this determines the amount compensated) and the exact location and times of where and when the work was done. It may be a few months before FEMA requests this documentation. Check with FEMA to find out if they have special forms that should be used.

WORKING WITH OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS

- Organizations such as World Vision, Samaritans Purse, and Convoy of Hope typically arrive soon after the crisis and stay for the long-haul. They usually have staff who are well seasoned to deal with crisis along with a skill set unique to crisis situations. Listen to them carefully and work with them they have a lot to offer. Don't be afraid to let them use your parking lot for their trucks if you have the space.
- Tide, Duracell, and other secular organizations will often send truckloads of relief supplies. Whether they locate at your facility or in some other location they are a wonderful source of free stuff to those in the affected area.
- We had a MULT-AGENCY WAREHOUSE (MAW) that was set-up in Joplin to receive incoming truckloads of supplies. They did an excellent job offloading trucks and storing supplies for many different organizations. They could store things for which we didn't have immediate space. We could also requisition general relief supplies that were designated for Joplin.

NETWORKING

- Attend as many meetings as possible. Build your network. Find out what others are doing and work together. Be sure to delegate meetings to specific people. One person typically can't handle all of the responsibilities.
- Plan on attending meetings for the long haul. They will prove to be a source of tremendous insight, resources and encouragement.
- Create a broader e-mail network with people who are interested in what you are doing in the relief effort. Send out regular e-mail blasts as your able.

STORAGE

- Skilled volunteers built sheds in our parking lot that have been invaluable.
- Temporary tractor trailers were donated for specific periods of time for storage in our parking lot.
- MULTI-AGENCY WAREHOUSE (MAW) was set-up and could handle shipments of supplies for which we didn't have the space.
- We diagramed the entire church and strategically stored various donated items in those places with a specific eye to flow and accessibility.

LOST PICTURES AND OTHER ITEMS

- It was common for our groups to discover lost pictures and valuables. We would collect these items and later turn them over to the proper authorities

SECURITY

- You should consider having a “front desk” person at the entrance of the facility whose main purpose is security... other front desk people should be assigned to greeting, answering phones, directing traffic and general triage.
- It’s important that you have someone patrolling your facility both inside and out throughout the night-time hours... this may also be necessary during the daylight. Doors were checked regularly to be sure they were properly secured.
- We identified trustworthy volunteers to assist us in observing behaviors in the living quarters. For the most part people were well behaved, but after several weeks some volunteers fell into drunkenness and fighting. We had a no tolerance rule. Drunkenness and fighting resulted in immediate expulsion and, if necessary, police action. We rarely had any problems.
- We used tables and chairs as natural barriers to keep people from wandering throughout the facility. For the most part this worked well, but we wound up putting locks on some of the rooms in order to protect records and equipment.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- It quickly became clear to us that children and youth were often neglected during the recovery effort. We immediately invited groups to come in and lead Vacation Bible Schools and Sports camps. We supplemented their leadership with our own to ensure that we as a church had personal contact with these children.
- We expanded our after school ministry to three days a week. We provided shuttle service from schools and too home. Every child receives the Awana Bible program, tutoring, the arts, games, and a home cooked meal. This program has approximately 100 registered children. We continue this program even two years after the tornado as our children have averaged four to five moves since the tornado. There is a great deal of instability in our community. We hired approximately 12 staff to assist us in this program.
- Youth ministry was also expanded to three days a week along with evening meetings and drop in times. We hired two extra staff to assist us in this ministry.

GUEST HOSPITALITY

- We offered three meals a day prepared by volunteers often using food donated for distribution (for the first six months there was plenty of food to go around). These meals were available to both overnight guests and people from the community. The place was always packed!
- We maps of Joplin at our front desk along with suggested restraunts and other activities in town.
- On our dining tables we had baskets of extra toothpaste and toothbrushes (there were thousands of these in distribution).
- We placed extra soap and shampoo in the showers and bathrooms.
- Although we didn’t advertise it we had extra towels available for those who didn’t have one.

- We worked hard to elevate all of our guests with love, encouragement, and gratitude. We often heard people say, "I never want to leave this place... this is what life should always be like!"
- We had a curfew... our doors to the outside were locked at 10 p.m. and lights were out at 11 p.m. We requested workers not to wake any earlier than 5:30 a.m.
- At first we provided Red Cross cots for those staying with us. Eventually, we bought our own, but we made the mistake of ordering cots which were too weak. The most sturdy and usable cots that we found were Ozark brand from Walmart and cost about \$33 per. Eventually, we had assistance from an Amish group who very quickly assisted us in building bunk fifty beds in rooms designated as dormitories. We purchased 5 inch foam mattresses for these bunks.
- Prayers were offered at every meal.
- A Wednesday evening worship service was started to encourage our volunteers.
- After the first four months of relief duties we became more selective in who we allowed to stay with us. Families, couples and groups with advanced reservations were preferred. The initial blush of male volunteers were fairly trustworthy, but eventually we became more of a haven for a more shiftless lot. In order to filter out those who were not really serving we gave them a three day notice and then they were escorted from the premises. This wasn't easy, but was necessary.

TRANSPORTATION

- Keep in mind that many people no longer have vehicles. Providing a free "taxi service" of sorts for people to go shopping, to the doctor or other important places may be necessary. We purchased a shuttle to assist us with this and other activities.
- We accepted all donations of vehicles... we needed them!
- We purchased a flatbed trailer and a box trailer to assist us in a host of relief activities. These proved to be invaluable.

TOOL CHECK-OUT

- We marked all of our tools (and there were many!) with bright neon spray paint, blue tape and a New Creation Label. This cut down on theft or accidental misplacement.
- We were very careful to record who checked out tools.
- Tools were always kept under lock and key.

SAFETY

- We had hundreds of bright yellow T-Shirts which we gave to groups working with us. With the amount of destruction we had these were almost as good as giving people reflective safety vests... which were much too expensive.
- We offered a list of recommended safety instructions to groups doing relief work.

- We provided breathing masks for all people going out to work in the debris field. Sadly, several people died due to various air mold infections. THIS IS A MUST!
- We often loaned hard hats to teams in danger zones.
- We provided safety goggles for those using chainsaws... THIS WAS A MUST!
- We installed appropriate exit signs with emergency lights in our aging facility.
- We purchased doors with crash bars for most of our exits.

BLOCK PARTIES

- We held 24 block parties in the wake of the tornado to help keep the spirits of people in the neighborhood high.
- We offered free food and drinks.
- We often had visiting bands or performers who donated their talents.
- We would bring in bounce houses, dunk tanks, and games for the kids.
- We built a makeshift portable stage in the parking lot.
- We also had donations of about 100 lawn chairs, 3 event grills and pop up tarps that we used.
- Block parties were great ways to disseminate information as well as excess supplies. When we stopped distributing clothes we placed everything outside for people to take. It worked!

SPECIAL PROJECTS

- One key project that we worked on was the building of storage sheds for people who had no place to store their belongings or tools for rebuilding. We used our parking lot for storage and production. Putting electrical outlets in the parking lot cost relatively little. This was a great project for groups that had down time on clean-up projects or needed a meaningful "one-day" project.
- Sauder Furniture offered us two truckloads of brand new furniture. We assembled and distributed 550 pieces to people in the community using volunteers.
- We have a lot of impoverished people in our community who still heat their homes with wood in the winter. We now have a log splitter and use the wood from the tornado to offer free wood to all who ask. This project has its practical limitation.
- There will be plenty of special opportunities to serve that come along that may or may not fit your ability to participate.

MONEY, FINANCING AND OTHER VALUABLES

- Put PAY PAL on your website immediately!
- Set up a separate bank account for donations... DO NOT CO-MINGLE RELIEF FUNDS WITH YOUR NORMAL OPERATING FUNDS!
- We received nearly \$750,000 in gifts which we had to account for... you may wish to invite someone outside of your organization to check your books from time to time. This helps to keep everyone honest!

- Work hard to account for every dollar of donations that come in
- Work hard to account for the use of every gift card that comes in and goes out. You may have to hire a bookkeeper.
- Purchase a SAFE and place it in a secure area with limited access. Cash donations may be placed here along with gift cards and odd gifts you may receive of gold, silver, stock etc.
- Quickly provide TAX LETTERS for people for the IRS. We included brief personal notes for as many people as we possibly could. This actually encouraged them to give more later on. This was a huge help.
- Spend the money for what it was given. Don't misappropriate funds. It's both unethical and a crime.
- We had to spend some funds on the churches infrastructure and facility. For instance, we purchased extra laptops for key staff and volunteers to use. We also needed to purchase materials to alter our facility to provide for certain aspects of the relief effort... building bunks, installing showers, building storage sheds etc.
- Your facility may also need repairs or replacements after the relief effort is over. You may want to hold back a reasonable portion of funds to cover these costs. Be careful not to be greedy... at the same time, don't be foolish... remember you were affected by the crisis too.

RECORD KEEPING

- Maintaining detailed records of givers and guests allowed us to send out e-mail blasts as well as mailings of "The Tornado Times." Mailings cost a little, but more than paid for themselves when people sent in donations.

GRANTS

- Different organizations offer grants to assist with disaster relief such as World Vision. We received a grant for utility offset and for working with children and families.
- Networking will help you discover where these grants are available.
- We retained a grant writer for some of our efforts.

PROBLEMATIC GUESTS AND OTHER UNSAVORY SITUATIONS

- We did not tolerate drunkenness, theft or fighting. Each case resulted in expulsion and occasionally required police involvement.
- Beware of volunteers who want to offer services that require a lot of money. We had one man convince us to spend \$800 to rent a truck while at the same time he spoke to a church group about renting a back hoe for \$1,000... eventually he had \$4,000 + from different groups and no heavy equipment before we caught him. Most volunteers are trustworthy, but every now and again you'll find the worst kind!

CHARITY TRACKER

- For \$15 a month we purchased Charity Tracker which helps us to screen people who are looking for food, supplies etc. At first we just handed things out to people in need, but we quickly realized that there were plenty of phonies and frauds who wanted to milk the system. Charity Tracker helped us to weed out the worst of the lot. They also helped us to see where people had been and what people received through other agencies. One blessing about CT is that once a person is in the system they don't have to re-register. This system helps us to work together in harmony with other churches and agencies that provide for the needs of those who are suffering.

POWER IN THE PARKING LOT

- We had so many activities in the parking lot... anything from block parties to construction work as well as RV's spending the night that it was worth the small amount that we invested.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

- This is a phrase that we were unfamiliar with when we first encountered it. It is not legally binding, but it can help you to win favor with groups who request it. It helped us for instance to buy time before we needed to come up to code on some areas of our aging facility.

RADIO, TV and INTERNET RESEARCH

- During the early stages of your operation it is important to assign individuals to listen to the radio and watch TV 24/7 to take notes. This is a great job for elderly volunteers who may not be able to do much physical labor. It also provides invaluable information in coordinating your relief effort with the rest of the city.
- Have individuals constantly research the internet to determine what other relief operations are doing. This can bring in critical information about incoming supplies, giveaways, meetings, and events happening around town.

STAFFING

- Hire Staff
- Delegate

Who else is doing this?... Does this need to be replicated?

How many can you accommodate?

What spaces can you spare?

Find your niche

Cooperate with everyone to the best of your ability

In the first six weeks try to help everyone

Meet with other pastors and community groups

Remember, things will look different for a while

Pray... ask God... watch for his hand

Overcoming shock

Impractical

Keep a personal journal

Watch out for burn out/frayed tempers/ encourage a lot

Dumpsters

Money... here today... gone tomorrow!

Don't forget pastoral care of parishoners

Renew old friendships/forgive/rest

Put people to work/ they are here to serve

Sustain your volunteer operations/don't give away everything... TP/papergoods/batteries/food

THE EFFECT ON OUR CONGREGATION