



Ten Things for a Parish to think about before a Disaster

Disaster preparedness refers to measures taken to prepare for and reduce the effects of disasters. That is, to predict and, where possible, prevent disasters, mitigate their impact on vulnerable populations, and respond to and effectively cope with their consequences. A parish should first assess and identify some key assets:

1. Identify volunteers that will be involved when a disaster occurs

Your parish may choose to appoint members to a committee or delegate the responsibility of recruiting volunteers to a Parish Disaster Coordinator. Members could be parishioners-at-large or may be representatives from other parish committees. You can assess people's interest by asking them to do a survey to gauge what types of services parishioners would like to undertake. Examples include: food prep, hospitality, clean-up crew, donations, repair, etc.

2. Establish partnerships. Get connected to your local community organizations, emergency responders and non-profit social service providers

The work of responding to and recovering from a disaster is truly an all-hands-on-deck effort. Identifying key partners and outlining expectations ahead of time is critical and will help you determine where there are already services available. Get involved in your local COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disaster). COAD's role is to bring the community together and enable them to work together during times of disaster preparedness, response, relief, and recovery. Here is a listing of [Iowa Community Organizations Active in Disaster](#).

3. Identify the most vulnerable in your parish

You not only want to have a ready list of who is most vulnerable in your parish, but also a game plan for who will check in on these individuals if a disaster happens and what services will be provided to them by the parish. You may want to enlist the aid of parish staff, Eucharistic ministers, visitation volunteers, and others who regularly visit the homebound or those who could be at risk during and after a disaster. An example is creating a "buddy system" in which parishioners would check-in with a vulnerable friend as soon as a disaster has occurred. Having all of this planned out before a disaster strikes will ensure that no one slips through the cracks.

4. Physical Space

After a disaster, there may be a need for temporary shelter for impacted individuals and families, housing for volunteer groups, or kitchen facilities to prepare meals. If your parish has space that might serve one of these functions, then you might want to consider whether this is a direction that you want to go. Some questions to ponder, include: what is the best use of our community space in the wake of a disaster, is the space compliant with the ADA and does it meet all code requirements for different proposed usages, if you open your space to others will

there be any liability issues and will someone need to monitor the space if it is used by outside groups?

5. Spiritual Care

The International Critical Stress Foundation found that 59% of those impacted by disaster preferred to receive support from a clergy or religious counselor compared to 45% seeking a physician and 40% seeking a mental health professional. Those impacted by disaster desire spiritual care and that the presence of spiritual care can be a useful referral source for other helping professionals. [“Light our Way” A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster](#) is an excellent resource.

6. Financial Resources

You may want to speak with your priest, finance council or Diocese about funding. This includes asking about the possibility of second collections or seeing if you have permission to raise funds for disaster work. This may also include being aware of local and state resources for individuals who have been impacted to receive direct funding.

7. Internal Communication Processes

A key component to consider is how communication with parishioners will happen during a disaster and vice versa. This includes notifying volunteers that particular ministries have been activated and disseminating information about how parishioners and other community members can get assistance (from the parish, FEMA, disaster agencies, etc.)

8. Create an action plan for your parish

Once you have finished assessing volunteer interest and capacity, partnerships, and physical space at the parish and all the above considerations, you can start crafting a plan of action for what your parish will do when a disaster occurs. You will want to have this ironed out ahead of time so that everyone understands their roles and knows the channels of communication and the scope of your services. You can also determine what you want to do prior to a disaster such as safeguarding important church documents and creating an emergency “go kit.” This may include updating your current emergency operations plan with the help of your local public health department.

9. Support from Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque

While not considered a first responder, Catholic Charities serves as a resource for parishes in times of disaster preparedness as well as recovery. We can assist by connecting you to local resources, provide crisis counseling services and assist parishes with applying for grant funding. Our [COVID-19 website page](#) has up to date information and our [Disaster Resources page](#) has additional resources.

10. Utilize existing resources for Community and Faith-Based Leaders

-[Plan, prepare, and respond to coronavirus disease](#) from the CDC.
-[Archdiocese of Dubuque Parish Disaster Preparedness and Response Guide](#)