

Making Your Church a Temporary Shelter for Disaster Victims

HOUSING VICTIMS OF DISASTER

Disasters—natural or man-made—often come with little or no notice, frequently leaving their victims homeless and in need of food and shelter. Churches and other ministry organizations are usually the first ones to step in to help, not only providing spiritual comfort, but also opening their facilities as temporary shelters for disaster victims.

Although relief efforts may fit the organization's biblical mission, church leaders also should consider a variety of security and safety precautions that will protect their ministry and safeguard the well-being of the people they help. Here are some to consider:

- **DETERMINE** first how many people your facility can handle. Fire codes and local ordinances set the number of people that can be in your facility at one time.
- **LIMIT** the areas of your facility in which disaster victims will have access. If you permit smoking on church grounds, designate and enforce the use of a specific smoking area, preferably outside your church building.
- **ENLIST** capable members of your congregation to minister to and monitor the activities of the people you house in your building on a 24/7 basis. Conduct regular patrols in areas accessible to disaster victims.
- **RECORD** the names of everyone you house. Also ask for the names of relatives to contact in the event of an emergency.
- **ESTABLISH** procedures to address any unlawful activities that may occur within your church facility. Communicate these procedures to those you house and the members of your congregation who are helping. You also may want to consider hiring specialists to help with security.
- **DETERMINE** how you will handle weapons and valuables that disaster victims may have in their possession when they enter your shelter. Those you help should not be allowed to possess weapons of any kind while they are housed at your church. Consider using a safe or tightly secured room to safeguard weapons and valuables. Before doing so, consider your legal responsibilities and the insurance risks you may incur while securing items for disaster victims.
- **SECURE** and/or monitor entrances at all times. Make sure that interior doors are in good repair and are unlocked in areas where disaster victims have access.
- **DETERMINE** if food will be prepared on-site or brought in from the outside. The size of your church kitchen and local health department regulations will drive your ability to serve food in your facility.
- **ESTABLISH** how you will maintain sanitary conditions. Can you provide shower facilities for both men and women? Consider the accumulation of trash and garbage. Maintain, perhaps increase, janitorial services.
- **MONITOR** the condition of your building on an ongoing basis. Make repairs promptly when needed, especially those that correct health and safety hazards.
- **STRONGLY ENCOURAGE** parents to be responsible for the safety of their children.
- **INSTALL SAFETY DEVICES** on all electrical outlets in areas where children may be housed.
- **ENSURE** that age-appropriate toys are provided to children. Be aware of toys that have small parts or work in ways that may cause injury to children.
- **KEEP** sidewalks cleared of toys and other obstacles that may cause falls and other injuries.

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These are just a few of the many precautions you should take as you open your church facilities to disaster victims. Prepare a permanent disaster relief plan if you expect to make your church facility available as a temporary shelter when the need arises in the future. As much as possible, plan ahead to ensure a safe and secure place for those you house, as well as those who call your church their spiritual home.

A SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

DEALING WITH POTENTIAL SEX OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

- **ENSURE** that the volunteers from your church, particularly those who are assigned to provide security, are

trained to identify potential sex offenders and victims of abuse. Contact local law enforcement officials immediately when you learn that a registered sex offender is housed in your facility and when any allegation of abuse occurs within the church shelter.

- **USE** only volunteers from your ministry—people you know and have screened in advance to work with children—to oversee all activities in which children are involved, especially when children are separated from their parents or are involved in group activities.

(Insurance Advisor #31 provides additional information about dealing with registered sex offenders in your church.)

