



Published on National Council of Nonprofits (<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org>)

Original URL: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/after-disaster-essentials-nonprofit-communication>

After a Disaster: The Essentials of Nonprofit Communication

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After disaster strikes, nonprofits are frequently on the front lines, helping their neighbors, clientele, and communities recover. The substance of responses will be different for each disaster, but communicating with these three groups tends to help recovery efforts go smoother.

Communicate with your team

One of the most important disaster preparedness tips from both the [Red Cross](#) and [Ready.gov](#) is for your family to have a plan for where to meet and how to get in touch with each other after a disaster. The same thing applies to your work family. In the aftermath of a disaster, communicating can be a challenge. Phone lines and cell phone towers may be damaged. With no power, there is likely no internet, and cell phone batteries only last for so long. Be sure your nonprofit has a plan for having everyone check in – and that everyone (board and staff) knows what to do and whom to call. While not possible for every nonprofit, having a point of contact out of state is best. Experience shows that sometimes calls going across state lines can be more likely to complete than calls just around the corner. Once you know everyone is safe – and who will or won't be able to assist in recovery efforts – you can proceed

with the next steps of your nonprofit's plan to get its operations back on track and helping others.

Communicate with your extended team

A disorganized response can make recovery more difficult. As nonprofits, we know that efficiency with limited resources is vital from day to day. It becomes even more important when need is increased and resources are more scarce. Coordinating through nonprofit and governmental networks can help get resources where they are most needed as quickly as possible – and without too much duplication. In the aftermath of many recent disasters, many nonprofits augmented their information from state and local governments by coordinating through their [state associations of nonprofits](#) and local chapters of [Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters \(VOAD\)](#). These groups often become clearinghouses of information (see this great example from [The Foraker Group in Alaska](#), pulling together resources for those affected by the recent earthquake) and can help connect disparate nonprofits with each other to coordinate relief efforts.

Communicate with the public

Disasters are no time to be seeking the limelight. But, similar to a tree falling in the forest, if no one knows what services your nonprofit is providing (especially if they go beyond your usual services), will those services go un- or under-utilized? Similarly, if there are specific items or volunteer help that your nonprofit needs, the public can help. After most disasters, local media post stories listing nonprofits that are helping and what donations are most needed – and those stories can get picked up elsewhere, broadening the base of potential support for your nonprofit to be able to help others. You don't need to draft a formal press release or media advisory; just reach out to the local paper, local NPR station, and local TV media to let them know what support your nonprofit is providing and how the public can help.

Resources

- [Disaster recovery – What nonprofits and donors need to know](#) (National Council of Nonprofits)
- [Disaster Relief, Providing Assistance through Charitable Organizations](#) (IRS Publication 3833)

- [Center for Disaster Philanthropy](#)