Musselshell County Recovery Team
Disaster Preparedness – Mapping the Road to Long-Term Recovery
Frequently Asked Questions

P.O. Box 713
ROUNDUP, MT 59072

To Whom It May Concern,

Flood, fire, earthquake, tornado, hurricane . . . the list could go on. Every community is different, but all of us face the potentiality of disaster.

What you have in your hands is the result of five years of learning the hard way.

In 2011 the small community of Roundup, Montana, and the surrounding area were hit by a devastating flood which inundated the lower part of town and displaced hundreds of people from residences and businesses near the river. Then, just one year later, a massive fire in the Bull Mountains south of Roundup burned 72 primary residences and many more outbuildings.

Between the two disasters, about 7% of the available housing in the county was affected. That would be like the city proper of Chicago (not the metro area) having two disasters affecting about 83,600 primary residences.* Unfortunately for small communities, most government involvement had a hard dollar threshold. This means that proportion is not taken into account. It’s not the percentage that matters, but the estimated dollar amount of damage done. It would be easy to meet such a threshold in a city, but not in rural Montana.

We were told repeatedly by relief organizations that disasters start local and end local. This has proven to be true.

What you will see in this video is the story of how the Musselshell County Recovery Team formed in response to these disasters. Hopefully, what we learned along the way will inspire you and people from your community to begin the process of planning for how you will deal with disaster and its long-term consequences.

You will also find attached a list of frequently asked questions.

The truth is that the only people who truly understand what it takes to recover from disaster are the people whose homes, lives, and businesses were disrupted by it. We hope to inspire you to learn to walk beside them as neighbors and to strengthen your community in the process.

Sincerely,

The Musselshell County Recovery Team (MCRT)

*Estimates using 2010 census records.
Musselshell County Recovery Team
Disaster Preparedness – Mapping the Road to Long-Term Recovery
Frequently Asked Questions

How was the determination made on who was able to get funds and benefit from this group?

We set the following parameters:
1) The property had to be the client's primary residence;
2) The client had to be registered with DES;
3) The client had to be in a vulnerable demographic – elderly, poverty, disabled, or dependent children;
4) The client had to work with a case manager in establishing needs & resources; and
5) For each project the goal was to get the client to a pre-disaster situation.

How was it determined to give funds to somebody?

Once a client established a plan of action, their case worker would present the case to the MCRT Supervisory Team. Discussion would follow on whether we could help them in this particular project.

Did insurance and FEMA Public Assistance change the amount of funding that person/case would be eligible for?

Approximately 90% our clients had no insurance or were underinsured and had to meet the parameters listed above. During the first flood, the Roundup Ministerial Association (RMA) provided funds to flood survivors, because MCRT was not yet set up, and FEMA provided the majority of assistance. Once MCRT was formed, trained, and ready, we placed into case management only those cases meeting our vulnerable demographic requirements and who had shown that any FEMA assistance that they may have received had been used for rebuilding their home.

Did the case workers have a training they attended before becoming a case worker?

Yes, our first case worker training came through the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). A subsequent training was done by our paid volunteer coordinator who had gone through the initial training and was very familiar with our entire process.

How did you keep the person/cases' privacy or prevent board members favoring one case due to personal knowledge of that person/case?

Every client was assigned a number. The case manager and volunteer coordinator were the only ones who knew the name and dealt confidentially with the client. At MCRT supervisory meetings, the case was always referred to by the number assigned. In the majority of the cases, we only paid vendors.

Did you require proof of insurance and FEMA Public Assistance before helping someone?

Because the client registered with DES and FEMA, we had information on the extent of damage and also access to FEMA information for the flood. In the few cases where they did have insurance, they were required to provide that information.
Musselshell County Recovery Team
Disaster Preparedness – Mapping the Road to Long-Term Recovery
Frequently Asked Questions

What was the best method for dealing with physical donations like clothes, bedding, furniture etc.? 

Avoid dealing with such donations if at all possible. Unless your community already has a distribution system set up, such as a food bank or thrift store that can handle the immense storage and manpower needed to deal with these types of donations, it is best to discourage them or request that the donor hold onto them until a specific need for them arises.

Were all financial donations from individuals in the area or did you get grants to have funds?

Individual donations came locally and nationally (we even received a donation from a former resident now residing in Japan). Most of the grants that we requested were for administration to pay for the part-time volunteer coordinator.

How is your organization structured and considered 501(c)(3)?

We are fiscally sponsored by a local community foundation with a 501(c)(3) designation. A careful review of the fiscal sponsorship relationship should be made before deciding on the formation of a recovery entity. Fiscal sponsors typically have ultimate control, ownership, and responsibility for all funds that pass through a sponsored entity. Additionally, there is usually a 4-10% fee charged by the sponsoring 501(c)(3) organization. Tax filing requirements vary based on the business structure chosen. Due to the fiscal sponsorship contract, when we voted to provide assistance, a requisition sheet was filled out with the case number, amount, vendor information, and two Board signatures to be submitted to the fiscal sponsor’s bookkeeper for payment. A copy of this requisition was also maintained in the client file.

How difficult is it to be established as a 501(c)(3)? Benefits and drawbacks?

There are legal forms, hundreds of dollars and ongoing yearly tax filings that are required to establish a 501(c)(3) and generally it can take 1-3 years to become qualified. One of the national advisors early on recommended that we go with a fiscal sponsorship. Having a sponsoring entity can (if set-up accordingly) alleviate the responsibilities that a 501(c)(3) require, but the drawback can be a lack of control and ownership of the entities’ funds. With the right fiscal sponsor, the benefits can far outweigh the drawback.

Were you trained to handle volunteers and donations?

In the first disaster, the Roundup Ministerial Association (RMA) and the DES office coordinated volunteers. Financial donations were given to RMA, which started a special account. When it became evident that RMA would not be able to handle the long-term recovery, MCRT was formed. We did not have training on how to handle the donations and learned along the way the importance of 1) having an accountant work with us and 2) ensuring that donated funds are released from restriction upon receipt. Restricted funds require special treatment and an accountant or bookkeeper with non-profit experience (or one willing to learn) can assist you with compliance.
Musselshell County Recovery Team
Disaster Preparedness – Mapping the Road to Long-Term Recovery
Frequently Asked Questions

If so, where can I get volunteer and donations management training?

Volunteers of America in Disaster (VOAD), United Methodist Committee of Relief (UMCOR) and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) provide volunteer, case worker and advisement on donation management. FEMA also has a volunteer community liaison who really put us on track to begin forming the long-term recovery team.

Are there any examples of pre-disaster plans (templates) available that your team used?

No, it was through the assistance of VOAD, UMCOR, and the FEMA community liaison that we were able to form. Templates are likely available, but we didn’t have them. We suggest that you begin by researching and contacting national organizations for advice. We did several phone conferences.

With respect to pre-disaster planning, does FEMA have any Flood Insurance Awareness programs so people will know they should have flood insurance?

Yes, FEMA has programs and material for individuals in the floodplain and Flood Insurance Awareness. A lot of this material can be picked up from your local DES Coordinator and Floodplain Administrator/Manager.

Did you find that you needed to get CSID counseling for the case worker volunteers?

(CSID would be like Montana CISM team/counseling. They assist in the events of high stress crisis situations.) --- We did not get this type of training, but it would be helpful.

How did you house and feed volunteers?

We were fortunate to have a non-profit 501(c)(3) school available to us that is typically used for groups and reunions. It provided shower facilities, kitchen, and room for sleeping quarters. We provided cots but all volunteers provided their own sleeping bags and their own food. However, we did coordinate with local churches to try to provide one hot meal a day for them.

****************************************

It is important to recognize the distinction between the initial response by community churches and organizations, which provide housing, meals, shelter, etc. and a long-term recovery team which works with a small percentage of clients (10-20 percent) to help them achieve long-term recovery. In a small community like ours, typically that means we are also a part of the initial response phase through our local churches and organizations, but long-term recovery is different than that. We hope that you never have to deal with a disaster in your community, but in the event that one strikes, we believe preparedness is the best tool for recovery.