

Top 10 Tasks: Quick Start Your Neighborhood Disaster Recovery

This article describes a simple and proven 10 step approach to set-up a do-it-yourself neighborhood disaster relief center. This is useful for anyone dealing with hurricane, fire, or other disaster recovery. If you have experimented with approaches like this before and can recommend improvements please leave a comment after this entry. Printable [MS Word](#) and [PDF](#) versions are available for download.

This approach to do-it-yourself recovery and disaster relief should be helpful to all those working to clean-up, heal and rebuild after disasters of almost any kind. This week's firestorm in San Diego, just like hurricanes like Katrina and Rita in 2005, remind us just how important these practices are for robust and resilient neighborhoods.

Our "Top 10 Tasks - Quick Start Your Neighborhood Disaster Recovery" is based on first hand experience bootstrapping our own recovery after the 2003 Cedar Fire that destroyed 400,000 acres in San Diego County, CA.

Most of our area is rebuilt four years after that fire. However, in our neighborhood, the "Top 10 Tasks" approaches made the difference between suffering and recovering, between continuing losses and immediate community self-help.

In 2004 we received loads of recognition from all the relief agencies that came to our neighborhood for how well run our do-it-yourself recovery center turned out to be. Our rural neighborhood of 100 properties has become much more prepared and resilient as a result of weaving these ten practices into the fabric of our community. The experience this week showed us how far we have come, and is already showing us how to be even more resilient in the future.

Hopefully these lessons learned will spark useful ideas for those preparing for disaster or in recovery from disaster. For the many who wish to be helpful to



folks in this situation, these ideas may bring a ray of hope and order to what otherwise may appear hopeless.

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RECOVERY - IT'S A PROCESS!

First it's important to realize and accept that recovery is a process with distinct phases:

Phase 1 - Disaster

Phase 2 - Clean-up

Phase 3 - Beginning Recovery

PHASE 1... DISASTER

Thankfully, phase two and three have a different pace, task, and tone.

Phase 1 is about adrenalin, getting a clear head from the disbelief and anger that this has happened, and bringing order from chaos. This will continue for

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a month or more. It's about getting basic survival issues handled: immediate medical attention, food, water, sleeping arrangements, clothing, safety from debris, security from troublemakers, sanitation, personal hygiene, and getting communication/information in and out of the area. Relief agencies will not act fast enough and there will be plenty of confusing and unmet predictions about what kind of help is on the way. Everyone looks wild and wasted. It's also about restarting the engine of community - a place to go to be together to talk. Below is the Top 10 Tasks list for this phase.

PHASE 2...CLEAN-UP

This phase may last 6 months to a year depending on the conditions and resources available. As the Disaster phase winds down the pace and tone will settle, and the tasks will turn to cleaning and resetting in preparation for rebuilding. Enter Phase 2 - Clean-up. For us, the Clean-up phase lasted several months and was characterized by the knowledge that we had taken care of all the immediate survival issues, everyone was accounted for and had a bed, and relief agencies and heavy equipment had begun to show up in force. It will be about clearing debris, sifting for belongings, and reestablishing a personal space (trailer, borrowed bedroom, government tent city) at some address. There may be a load of donated stuff to deal with that needs to be stored and distributed. Paperwork related to FEMA, SBA, insurance companies, Salvation Army, Red Cross, etc. will begin to be very important for individuals so they can get into the various streams of financial aid. All of these streams are only marginally integrated and often dependent on one another. It is highly frustrating at best and usually not enough money. Expect to see a general improvement in cleanliness among the neighbors at your meetings. In place of wild-eyed fear and confusion expect fatigue but with more clarity. Predictably, there will be plenty of emotion surfacing as people get a chance to catch their breath and actually experience their feelings: anger, blame, grief - all very natural. With luck, these will be offset by the community solidarity and appreciation for kindness that can be kept in the foreground through the steps below. Remember - be patient with each other and impatient with the overall recovery.

PHASE 3...BEGINNING RECOVERY

This phase will last for at least 5 years. The first newly rebuilt home was moved into roughly 12 months after our local fire, most are still not complete after 2 years. In our experience this phase is characterized by the complexity of bureaucracy in the insurance/contractor/county system, but also the joy that neighbors are getting real things built. The suffering may shift from

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physical to emotional and intellectual as the first 90-120 days of Red Cross services wind down and the long-term relief comes in. Everyone will have to work through the multitude of forms, intake interviews, and begin to reconnect to the world of money, mortgages, taxes, and insurance. There will be all kinds of odd deals/discounts that pop up from different stores. Volunteer and service groups will arrive in force. Possibly Billy Graham's Samaritans Purse, the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation, the Southern Baptists, and others. Some are surprisingly well organized and funded for just this kind of support, though the magnitude of this disaster is unprecedented in scope. Other small groups will pop up. Most are helpful but not as professional, and some have ulterior motives to look out for. In our case a church 20 miles away adopted our valley and so they became our primary source for all kinds of support for a whole year.

1. MAKE A PLACE TO MEET AND COORDINATE EFFORTS

Set a regular meeting time every day so that neighbors have a place to congregate, comfort one another, and problem solve. Government and service agencies will want to know when they can access the most community members in one place. A set time each day lets individuals do what they need to do with their day planned around the timing of the community meeting and possibly Red Cross provided communal meal. In this phase everyone's goal for the day: get fed, get safe shelter, and get to the meeting.

2. POST SIGNS ABOUT YOUR "RELIEF CENTER"

Let neighbors and relief agencies know when and where you will be meeting. You will be amazed who finds your meeting and what resources they bring. There will be people looking for places to bring relief. There will be next-door neighbors you've never met showing up. On your signs indicate in clear block letters: Name of Neighborhood, address and time of meeting, resources you've got, and resources you need. The signs will change as the conditions change.

3. ESTABLISH A DESIGNATED TOILET AND BATHING AREA

Sanitation and personal hygiene are critical for health and dignity. Do this as soon as possible. Plan for more people to use this resource than your immediate neighbors because everyone who comes to help will have needs as well. The faster the portable toilets come in the more you'll feel like civilization is returning.

4. MAKE AND SHARE LISTS

Knowledge and information is powerful for peace of mind and action. At minimum begin the following lists with who ever shows up. Expand and work the lists at every meeting everyday. Make them as big as you can so a group can read them without getting up from a seat. If you can get flip chart paper, markers and tape that's great. If you can't big pieces of cardboard or butcher paper works just as well. Any list is better than no list.

A center leader will hear the question "What do you need?" a hundred times per day once connection to the outside world is reestablished. [It may come from well meaning volunteers who are emotionally traumatized just by the experience of coming into the disaster area. Send them home.] If you don't have lists, the "what do you need?" question will drive you crazy. After two weeks my answer became: "Thank you for offering your help. Look at the lists, look around, decide what improvement needs to be made, then go make it happen!"

- **Neighborhood Directory**

Make a directory of contact info for everyone in the neighborhood with normal and interim address, phone, etc. Have a page for each family and include "condition notes" about them (shelter, health, special needs, number and ages of children, missing relatives, resources they have like tools, cell phone, or car). Government and relief groups will need this information to figure out who your highest need families are during the course of clean up and recovery.

- **Lists of Needs**

Include the individual's name, the need, the date, and a check mark when the need is filled. Celebrate check offs!

- **Resource Lists**

Include contact information about all sources of help, advise, money, supplies, tools, equipment, donations, neighbors with skills, etc.

- **Volunteer Sign-Up Lists**

People want to help themselves and help others. Feeling useful is critical to recovering. Make it easy for people to serve in whatever way they can by making lists of things that need to be done and ask victims to become volunteers by signing up. Providing organization empowers and gives direction. It puts steel back into backbones. As groups of volunteers form on a task list, give 'em a fun team name if you can and turn 'em loose to do their work. Get a progress check



from each team at each meeting and celebrate it. Start the following teams immediately:

a. Relief Center Team

Preparing a meeting space with list making supplies. Set up a latrine. Make a plan to take care of whoever is lending their home to the effort for the meeting place. Make sure whoever is leading the neighborhood recovery effort stops periodically to eat and sleep. Give them help to get their own paperwork and recovery tasks done.

b. SOS Team

Make contact with relief agencies, churches, governments, etc. Update them with your needs lists, contact information, and get as many contact names from these agencies as you can. Invite every single one to come to your neighborhood meetings. Politicians love an audience; so invite every one of 'em you can. They can pull resources in your direction. Signage around the neighborhood is key. Find the other neighborhood centers that are springing up.

c. Basic Supplies Team

Find the sources for basic supplies, establish a storage space, and as relief groups start to arrive schedule regular meal and food delivery. Relief groups will look for places where they can serve as many people as possible. So if you establish a center, you'll be the address (this is called enlightened self-interest)

d. Communications Team

Put a team on getting cell phones, email, and other communication tools going. Have them make and post signs at places where convoys of agencies and volunteers will see them.

e. Safety & Security Team

These folks will need to find out what local police or National Guard is operating in the area. Ask them for advice about how much protection you need for the center supplies, and then do what your gut tells you is necessary. Invite them to your neighborhood meetings. Clear the area as best you can of dangerous debris, especially road areas where support vehicles



will need to come through, park and turn around. You may be able to rig up a truck into a makeshift "pusher" for shoving debris off to the roadside enough to clear a path. A chain will turn a truck into a "puller" that can tow debris out of the way.

5. PREPARE FOR A MOUNTAIN OF PAPER

There will be mountains of fliers, brochures, forms, catalogues, etc. Set up a place and a system early on for keeping it organized. Doing so will make it easy to use by all and keep the clutter from sapping energy from you during the process. There will be dozens of business cards of key people from government, service agencies, contractors, and others. Tape the biz cards 8 to a page on notepaper so you can put a binder together, and the whole lot can be copied and handed out as needed. This will become a critical tool.

6. CONDUCT GOOD MEETINGS

People need leadership and order into which they can serve and be served. Here's a basic agenda for every neighborhood meeting for the first 2 weeks:

- **Choose a meeting facilitator and a note keeper.**
Everybody agrees to let him or her keep order in this meeting and manage it so that everyone gets a chance to speak and that only one conversation is happening at a time. This will be difficult as tempers will be short and patience will be shorter. But it is doable.
- **Basic Agenda Items:**
 - a) Opening prayer for strength, clarity, compassion and guidance led by one of the attendees
 - b) Who is here - introductions all around
 - c) What needs have been met: review the needs lists and check off items that are done.
 - d) Applaud and cheer for success.
 - e) What needs still exist: review the needs lists and add
 - f) Add names to the sign-up lists for getting resources, clean-up, etc.
 - g) Guest Speaker - if there is a special announcement or government, service agency representative give them time for their presentation.
 - h) Closing prayer (perhaps a song of hope and strength).
 - i) Thank everyone for coming and remind them all of the next meeting time.



With this basic agenda, it's amazing what you can accomplish. People will have all kinds of things to say around the edges of it, but it will help.

7. ORGANIZE FOR SECURITY

Make a list of likely safety and security issues. For each issue talk about how best to handle it. Any plan is better than no plan and talking about such things directly in a problem-solving manner is useful to relieve anxiety. Get a team put together on your volunteer sign up lists for this effort.

8. A PLACE TO STOCK SUPPLIES

With the neighbors, figure out where the most sensible place would be to make a neighborhood storehouse for essentials. This will need to be dry and safe. Organize it like a small store but for free. When the relief organizations start coming they will look for places to drop off bulk deliveries. If you make it easy for them, they will likely keep coming with more. The same is true for donations from private church groups and individuals. They may bring truckloads of clothing or who knows what. Prepare to sort it. All kinds of things may appear that are not useful in the moment, but may be later (toys for children's Christmas gifts for example). Get ready to receive and advertise with signs around the area that you are ready.

9. CARE FOR THE CARE GIVERS

Whoever steps up to leading the efforts in a neighborhood is a hero. Period.

And, even heroes need to rest, receive relief, be comforted, and get their own recovery handled. To serve and lead neighbors in a time of disaster delays getting personal needs met. Leaders have a reserve that they can draw upon in the short run, but eventually, the caregivers and leaders need to be cared for too. They may resist, putting themselves at the back of the line, but it is critical to the neighborhood that the needs of the leaders get handled eventually. Make sure that someone close to the leaders is keeping an eye on their condition and bringing help to them, which they will not likely for ask on their own.

The caregivers may fall prey to the "Stockholm Syndrome" which is essentially falling in love with the kidnapper. The relief center/neighborhood becomes such an intense focus, that it may become very hard to pull away from it to regain perspective. Beware of thinking that "my people won't survive without me" and therefore you don't give yourself a break from all the effort. Leaders need to assign someone to monitor their condition daily

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phone check-in if not in person, to vent and reset. This is critically important.

Keeping the leaders going helps keep the community going.

10. STOP & CELEBRATE EVERY SMALL SUCCESS

At every point that there is a minor success, applaud those who made it happen. If it's a team that pulled off a minor miracle, name each and every person involved. Recognize the greatness in the people, and they will find more of it. Ask one of the following questions at each of your neighborhood meetings:

___What acts of senseless kindness did you provide, observe or receive today?

___What creative idea did you have or see today?

___What progress are we making?

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