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Preparing for disasters

Convoy of Hope program helps groups respond.

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News-Leader*

In the Springfield area alone, there have been at least six weather disasters in less than two years -- including ice storms, tornados and flooding.

Rob Clay, associate director of Convoy of Hope's U.S. Disaster Response, said Tuesday such disasters have heightened the need for preparation and response, especially on the part of the faith community.

"How can your church minister to the community in times of emergency?" Clay asked about 200 people gathered Tuesday, representing churches and other faith-based organizations from around the Ozarks.

He answered that churches -- like every organization -- must engage their members in personal preparation so they can then turn to community outreach.

Tuesday was the first gathering of HOPE (Helping Others Prepare for Emergencies) Begins Here, a new project of Convoy of Hope, a faith-based organization that responds to disasters around the world.

The program is delivered in three phases -- the first to the faith-based community, then to businesses and other organizations April 23, and then a preparedness festival for families May 3. It is meant to help organizations learn how to respond to emergencies of all types, for their members and communities.

Springfield, Convoy's home base, is the first community to host the series. Convoy plans to take it around the country.

Ice Storm

The ice storm of January 2007 became a learning opportunity for many churches in the area.

The American Red Cross turned to churches to serve as shelters for the hundreds of people who were left without heat or power, some for more than two weeks.

Debi Meeds, executive director of the Greater Ozarks Chapter of the Red Cross, said the lessons learned in those weeks have helped churches and the Red Cross recognize their interdependence.

"We have proven that when churches and the Red Cross partner together amazing things can happen," she said.

Mistakes have also been educational. With the obvious need arising, some churches opened their doors without first coordinating with the Red Cross or any other outreach agencies.

Meeds said after the first few hours, many of those churches realized they needed more help. Their calls for help put additional stress on the Red Cross, which sometimes could not provide what was needed.

As churches opened their doors and hearts to their neighbors, they didn't always realize that other churches nearby were also open, she said. In that way, resources were not being used wisely.

Another problem was that the public was not informed about some church shelters because the media was unaware of them.

The Red Cross's First Steps program allows churches and other facilities to be utilized in the best way for the community and for the church, said Chris Harmon, disaster services coordinator.

Schweitzer's Efforts

Schweitzer United Methodist Church in Springfield has been active in the disaster ministry.

Ed Hewlett, who heads up the ministry, talks about how the church was able to accomplish that.

In 2003, when Hewlett began the ministry, the church had no plans for a disaster. Since then, Schweitzer has not only served as a shelter in times of need, the church has been able to reach out beyond its doors to other communities and other churches, he said.

"You can't budget for it," he admitted.

The church's emergency response trailer, truck and about \$20,000 in equipment were all donated, he said. And the work done has been accomplished by volunteers.

"You have to realize this is a ... ministry, not a program of the church," Hewlett said.

But before that ministry could be implemented, the church had to have plans in place. "If you're not prepared, you're part of the problem," he said.

Schweitzer is now a designated Red Cross shelter, housing both those affected by disasters and volunteers who have traveled here to assist. The church also has a regular outreach to churches that are serving as shelters in other communities.

Last summer, the church was the first in the area to be designated as a point of dispensation, or POD, in case of a pandemic or bioterrorist event.

In the case of a flu pandemic, the health department has arranged for several places where the public would be able to obtain anti-viral medication, such as Tamiflu or Relenza.

But staying out of public places is an important part of controlling a pandemic, said Molly Holtmann, health department pandemic health planner.

Organizations would be asked to take care of their own, she said.

Schweitzer volunteers have been trained to distribute the medication to its membership, something every church should do, she said: "We have to take care of each other," she said.

Schweitzer has also participated in the Community Emergency Response Team training through the Office of Emergency Management in Greene County.

"Churches need three or four CERT members in the congregation," said Director of Emergency Management Ryan Nichols.

The training prepares individuals how to take care of themselves and their family, check on neighbors, and then move on to help in the community.

Learning To Help

Leslie Jones and Anthony Johnson attended the HOPE Begins Here program to get credit for a sociology class at Central Bible College. They learned more than they expected.

"I didn't know it takes three to five days for the government to respond to a disaster," said Johnson, 20, who plans to be a pastor.

"I want to help out the community any way I can," added Johnson, who later asked how to get a HOPE Begins Here program in his hometown of Springfield, Ill.

Jones, 19, said her family home in Clinton was destroyed by a fire four years ago. "My church didn't really reach out much," she said.

She plans to take the lessons she learned to her home church and with her when she becomes a missionary.

Learning what needs doing and what a church can do is the next challenge for Troy Teague, pastoral care pastor at Grace Church in Rogersville.

A "team concept church," Grace already has 13 ministry teams, and with about 90-100 members who meet in a strip mall, the church is limited, he said.

"I want to develop a team for one specific area, to be a small part of something big," Teague said. "It could be anything."

The half-day program gave Teague plenty to think about and take back to his church.

"This is an eye opener," he said, "and a heart opener."