

DEVISING A MORE EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

GIVEN the frequency of natural disasters and Rotarians' desire to help in such situations, there is a vital need for us to understand key emergency management processes and for the ways we provide support to be reviewed, quantified and strategised.

I thought, perhaps, it was high time I offer some of my thoughts on the subject, given my 35 years' experience working in fire and emergency roles and some 27 years in Rotary.

Rotary has many opportunities to provide support to individuals, families, regions and countries affected by disaster – and has done so with success. Great efforts to assist recovery have included helping dispossessed communities with RotaHomes and resources like Emergency Response Kits and ShelterBoxes. We also rally funds and goods to support those affected by emergencies.

However, well-intentioned efforts are not always effective, which is something we need to dwell on to ensure our time and hard work is not misspent. A prime example occurred in the aftermath of the 2004 Manawatu Floods in New Zealand's North Island, when containers of



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second-hand goods were sent to the region. These included clothing, furniture and household appliances in various states of repair and usability.

While those giving these items certainly meant well, clearly the logistics, in terms of storage, distribution and whether the items were really what the people needed, had not been considered. It required a lot of effort for those on

the receiving end to sort, catalogue, identify appropriate recipients and find storage.

In the end, a good chunk of goods was not actually fit for distribution to the needy. It was another problem to find a secure landfill to put these items to ensure they did not find their way back onto the market, which could be dangerous, particularly in the case of electrical goods.

In most emergency events, people require accessible funds and access to a supply chain of goods and services



they can purchase to get back on their feet quickly. Given local businesses are often disrupted, support offered from towns nearby usually provides the most important disaster relief. In the case of Manawatu, the money spent on shipping the container would have been better turned to supporting a delivery from a neighbouring town, which would have more efficiently and easily reached the needy anyhow – and been what they actually required.

Very much reflecting my way of thinking, RI president elect Barry Rassin recently said, “Rotarians around the world hear of a disaster and they want to help. We need a better way to communicate to them how to help appropriately. It’s not appropriate to go into your closet and send whatever clothes you have, because that’s not necessarily what’s needed. First, we have to hear from the people in the disaster area. Their needs can change on a daily basis.”

We are fortunate to have some of the best-networked and knowledgeable people involved in Rotary, who know how to “get stuff done”. But we need to ensure our support in times of emergencies and disasters is properly targeted, planned, resourced, coordinated and delivered. None of us want our well-intentioned support to miss the mark.

The military has a term called “stand up time”; the period it will take from notification of intention to mobilise to the point when the required personnel and resources are mobilised and arrive to undertake the duty. We, too, as Rotarians, need to figure out our “stand up time”. How long before we coordinate a fund to receive donations to the suffering receiving the money? How quickly can we bring together resources for distribution? Are there ways we can do this better and faster?

We also need to develop ways to ensure Rotary support is synchronised with lead agencies on the ground, such as government and emergency services, who can tell us who needs

help and how. It doesn’t make sense for clubs to do this individually. I personally believe we need to work on district and even nationwide strategic plans to use to liaise and support community emergency events in a cohesive, thoughtful fashion.

Currently, myself and RI past president Bill Boyd, along with key likeminded Rotarians, are working to make a Rotary Disaster Coordination and Response Plan for Rotary International.

Our Zone 7B and 8 individual Rotarians, districts and clubs from around Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific interested in participating in the discussion and plan development

are encouraged to contact me at fiona.mitch@xtra.co.nz

Together, we can surely create swifter, more efficient and effective methodologies for Rotarians to do what they do best – help those in need at the time in their life they seek support and aid. Through local community coordination, we can help get their disrupted lives back in order.

We will need to change our hearts and minds to ensure our best Rotary efforts for any disaster or emergency event is fit for the purpose, with a focus on our coordinated support and response to *Make A Difference* to our communities in their time of need. •

Initial thoughts on channelling our coordinated discussion and plan development:

1. Establish a district or multi-district disaster committee.
2. Establish a specific bank account and determine rules for its use (including signatories).
3. In case of response need, contact your zone director.
4. Contact any local, community, council, state or national government agency established for the purpose of relief and express your interest and available support and resource.
5. Advise neighbouring districts and zones – immediate need is cash.
6. Advise RI of disaster and your bank account details.
7. Ask clubs to determine immediate needs and ways to address those needs. Connect and stay in touch with the lead emergency management agency.
8. Ask Disaster Network of Assistance Rotary Action Group (DNA RAG) for any advice, support, coordination and publicity.
9. As needs become clear, identify partners to work with.
10. Be conscious of avoiding waste – be it time, effort, resources or donations.