FEMA Donations Management Questions and Answers

8 Why is it necessary to manage donated goods and services after a disaster?

Donations management is necessary to control the flow of goods and services into a disaster area. If trucks, trains, ships, and planes are allowed to wander into the disaster area looking for a place to drop off their donations they can easily interfere with ongoing disaster response operations. Uncontrolled shipments of donations can also put an undue burden on disaster response operations as they compete for scarce response resources such as manpower and equipment to unload, sort, store, and reship the goods. Above all, it is necessary to manage the flow of donated goods to be sure the needs of disaster victims are being met as effectively as possible.

8 How are donations best managed?

Donations are best managed by a team of voluntary agency representatives, State and local government officials, and if necessary, FEMA donations specialists. The key is to give the public the opportunity as early as possible after a disaster (or even before in the case of an imminent hurricane) to talk with emergency management officials and voluntary agency representatives to find out what is really needed by the disaster victims, who to send the goods to, and how to send them.

8 Who does the public talk to in order to find out what is needed in the disaster area?

In most major disasters, FEMA and some of the voluntary organizations will have an 800 number for donations available to the public. People can register with the 800 number operator what donation they would like to make or they can ask what is needed.

8 Who donates?

Donations typically come from a very wide variety of sources: individuals, families, communities, towns, and cities wanting to adopt a similar community in the disaster area; businesses; civic associations such as the Rotary Cubs, Jaycees, and Lion’s Clubs; groups such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, artists, farmers, hospital workers, and union members. Many international donations are also made from all over the world.
**What do they donate?**

Goods such as cleaning supplies, including work gloves, boots, buckets, mops, brushes, detergents; food; bottled water; clothes; building supplies; equipment, such as water pumps, generators, tools, vehicles; and warehouse space. Depending on the disaster, volunteer services in the following areas are made such as cleanup and sandbagging volunteers; medical; environmental; clerical; legal; logistician volunteers; and animal handling, crisis counseling, and transportation services.

**Why do people make donations?**

Some people may have suffered a similar loss as in a flood or tornado. Others simply wish to make some kind of contribution to help especially after seeing graphic news stories of the disaster on the television.

**Why is cash often said to be the preferred type of donation?**

There are many advantages to making a cash contribution to a voluntary organization that is working in the disaster area. Cash helps the voluntary agencies meet the precise needs of the disaster victims in the community. Spending money in the disaster affected community will help with the local economy whereas many free donated goods will compete with local businesses in the disaster area. Sending cash, rather than truck loads of goods, avoids the often difficult, labor-intensive logistic tasks such as off-loading goods, sorting, storing, repackaging, and re-shipping the goods.

**Why does FEMA plan to set up an 800 number for donations?**

FEMA is prepared to activate an 800 number in a major disaster in order to serve the donor public and the disaster affected area. Early establishment of such a number is a key to success in donations management. It gives the public the opportunity to share their information about what may be available to the voluntary agencies in the disaster area and to government agencies. Communicating with the public early helps to significantly reduce the notorious unsolicited goods. The 800 number serves the disaster area by channeling valuable information about free resources to the appropriate field personnel who, in turn, process the offer and, upon acceptance, help meet disaster survivors’ needs.
Why do some states set up their own 800 number service for donations?

In some states, there may be an ongoing emergency need, such as the collapse of a city’s water supply or the immediate need for volunteer services such as sandbaggers, that requires a State 800 number service to provide immediate guidance to the donating public. A national number may not be able to provide as up-to-the-minute service to the public. In the Flood of '93, Iowa and Illinois had specific needs for State-based 800 number services while the FEMA national 800 number served Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska (also shared information with Iowa and Illinois).

Who determines the need?

The needs in the disaster area are best determined by experienced voluntary agencies including local church groups who know the affected communities well.

Are volunteer services needed?

In some disasters, there may be a need for volunteers. For example, many volunteer sandbaggers were needed in the Midwest Floods of 1993. In most disasters, there is a need only for trained, experienced volunteers. In all cases, it is best for an individual or group to obtain some disaster training before entering a disaster area to work. Several voluntary agencies provide such training. At the time of the disaster, consult with an experienced voluntary agency or call the 800 number for additional information regarding the need for volunteers. All volunteers should expect to be self-sufficient in the disaster area. Volunteers are best advised to have sufficient traveling funds to cover their living expenses in the area and return trip home.

Does the United States receive international donations?

Yes, significant donations from foreign countries are often made to support the disaster response and recovery efforts. Many countries make financial contributions directly to the disaster affected State and local governments. Other countries work through the U.S. State Department and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to determine what is needed in the disaster area. FEMA, in turn, works with the State government to decide if the offer should be accepted or gratefully declined.
Will the Federal government provide free transportation for donated goods?

Only in extreme cases, where there may be a significant donated resource that a State government informs FEMA is required for emergency response operations and that can not be located regionally, will FEMA consider transporting the goods. As a rule transportation is not provided. It is extremely expensive and not practical for the government to transport donated goods. Moreover, there is, at times, significant donated transportation that can be utilized to transport goods. Part of FEMA’s role is to be a match-maker and share what information it collects regarding all donations, including what free donated transportation may be available.