

Early Response Teams

One way local churches, sub-districts, and districts can help in the aftermath of a disaster is through Early Response Teams (ERT). ERT has a very narrow function! **ERT provides immediate cleanup assistance but has no management or administrative responsibility for the overall disaster response.** The Conference Assessment Team has responsibility for surveying the scope of the damage and the response in the early days after the disaster event. All management and deployment decisions for volunteers (including ERT) are under the direction of the Disaster Coordinator, or designee.

What is early response and why is there a need for Early Response Teams?

ERT grew out of the denomination-wide United Methodist Volunteers in Missions movement. The ERT purpose is to give visibility to our United Methodist presence, reassuring victims that the church cares enough to respond immediately to their need. Teams provide immediate assistance, usually to those who are older or disabled and others who might not have their support system nearby to help them with the hard work of *debris clean-up* or to make *temporary repairs* to their home.

What do Early Response Teams do?

Their primary duties are to remove debris and to make temporary repairs, following the guidelines on how to make a home **safe, sanitary and secure**. The purposes of temporary repairs are to make the building safe (**safe**), reduce health hazards to victims (**sanitary**), and reduce further damage (**secure**). **Teams are not to perform any rebuilding or other repair work that may jeopardize a victim's eligibility for financial assistance from insurance and government. NO PERMANENT REPAIRS are to be made by ERT!**

Their secondary duties are:

- To be part of a caring ministry of listeners who will help the victims begin to heal.
- To observe victims' needs and report these to conference and UMCOR disaster relief operation leaders.

What don't the Emergency Response Teams do?

1. **They don't make permanent repairs or begin rebuilding.** To do so before insurance and government assessments are done and permission to proceed is given may reduce or eliminate any assistance from those sources. (This can become a liability issue for team members, churches and the conference if teams are thought to hinder a person's access to benefits.) Rebuilding and permanent repairs will be done by other teams that will come in during the recovery/re-building phases.

2. **They don't come into a disaster area without an invitation from the conference disaster response authorities.** Out-of-conference teams do not go in an area affected by a disaster until invited by the host conference disaster committee. We can all imagine the extra chaos and frustration generated by teams arriving unexpectedly and without an assignment. All teams will be given specific instructions about reporting locations for volunteer teams where assignments will be given by the local disaster response volunteer coordinator.
3. **They don't make promises.** In these early days of response, no one can know how things will turn out and whether anyone from our group or any other group will be able to do anything further. Victims are desperate, and often a "maybe" or a "we'll check on it," can sound like a "yes." Be careful.

Team Organization

Most teams are composed of 6-12 people. Since part of the goal of forming an ERT is to be ready for immediate deployment in time of need, it is recommended that you recruit 3 times as many as the size of the team you want to deploy. This seemingly "over-recruitment" of volunteers gives you a better chance of fielding a full team at any time, and offers the possibility of deploying 2-3 teams at a time.

Roles of Team Members

Although everyone on the team will work in debris removal and temporary repairs, at least one team member should fill each of these necessary roles:

- Team Leader
- Assistant Team Leader
- Logistics Manager: responsible for supply and team safety
- Base Camp Manager: responsible for food, cooking, water, etc.
- Equipment Maintenance
- Designated Listener to visit with victims in a ministry of caring

Teams are encouraged to participate in conference-wide training opportunities when scheduled. Team leaders should continually reinforce the following:

- Team roles and lines of responsibility—who does what.
- Safe use of equipment and how to avoid potentially dangerous situations in a disaster area.
- The ministry of caring (everyone is a caregiver) good listening skills and what to do when encountering a person in crisis.
- The purpose and tasks of the Early Responder, including the meaning of "safe, sanitary, secure."
- How an ERT fits into the larger picture of the conference and UMCOR response.

How do we equip an Emergency Response Team?

Each team must be self-sufficient and self-sustaining, with its own tools, food, fuel, water, and sleeping gear. These expenses are to be covered by the team or its sponsoring church. In the early stages of disaster response, an affected community is in no way able to support and entertain outside volunteer workers. It is important that each team member have an identification issued by the conference! This will be necessary to get inside the secured disaster area.

An equipment trailer is recommended, but not necessary. The advantage of a trailer is that everything in it is together and ready to go in a short time.

A special word about chainsaws needs to be offered. Because of liability issues, UMCOR suggests that teams not include chainsaws in the trailer for general use. If, however, an individual member wants to bring their own chainsaw and they have proof of taking a chainsaw safety course, it would be fine for the chainsaw to be used.