

# How Your Chapter Should Respond To Natural Disasters In Your Area



The Los Angeles wildfires that burned thousands of acres earlier this year have had us talking about responses to natural disasters — who responds and how. We typically think of local fire, police, EMT and hospitals, and national and international organizations like the Red Cross, as being first in line to help people affected by fires, floods, earthquakes, etc.



With the place association chapters already hold in the local community, they are a natural fit for playing critical roles in disaster response. In addition to being connected to those affected, chapters have access to many of the resources needed before, during and after a natural disaster.

A chapter with members who have medical skills, for example, might organize a clinic or provide other types of health volunteers. An engineering chapter could help assess building safety and infrastructure damage, A non-profit or fundraising organization could coordinate relief efforts, raise money or help members complete grants and applications in their search for recovery funding.

Here are some of the many ways you can help members and their families, as well as your vendors, sponsors, members, employers and your entire community, make it through a natural disaster.

## **Chapter response to natural disasters: before, during and after**

## Preparedness & planning

- **Education and training:** Offer workshops or webinars that walk members through developing an emergency response plan, for themselves, their family, their company, etc. You could also develop a basic emergency response toolkit and make it available for free to download.
- **Communication:** Create ways to keep members connected and informed during an emergency, like email trees, group chats emergency check-ins, etc. Regularly test and update these systems to ensure you have current contact information for all involved.
- **Partnership:** Connect with local government, emergency services and relief organizations to understand what they do and how your chapter can assist with disaster response. Consider bringing people from these organizations to talk to your members and partner organizations.
- **Resources:** Ask members about the skills they have, like speaking other languages, first aid training, etc., and equipment they have access to, like backup generators, that can be useful in an emergency. Create a database with this information and up-to-date contact information.

## Support & coordination

- **Information:** Be a trusted resource for accurate, local information and guidance tailored to the industry/profession you serve. This includes details about the disaster, drop-off and pick-up points for food and supplies, temporary housing, etc.
- **Member check-ins:** Use the communication infrastructure you set up to quickly assess the safety and needs of members and partners and prioritize support.
- **Rapid mobilization:** Organize volunteer efforts or aid. Does one of your members need a generator, or can you deliver meals to first responders? This is where knowing the specialized skills and resources of your members is useful.
- **Bridge to your parent chapter:** Be the local contact for your national organization, so they can remain informed.

## Recovery & resilience

- **Advocacy:** Represent your local community in discussions with policymakers, funders and national organizations.
- **Support:** Offer recovery resources, like discounted services from your member network, grants and support groups. Or give them a chance to get help from experts, like a county assessor, a representative from a local housing organization, etc.
- **Community re-engagement:** Help members reconnect, re-open businesses or offices and restore operations. Can you provide volunteers for cleanup, building assessments or grants? Or could hold a chapter event for the community to come to grieve and begin rebuilding?



- **Knowledge:** Document and share lessons learned for future planning, in the chapter and across the community. What did you learn about your chapter's disaster response? What could you have done differently?

### **Involving chapters in disaster recovery: some examples**

To support local recovery after the LA wildfires, two of our clients, the Asian Real Estate Association of America (AREAA) and the LA chapter of The Institutes CPCU Society focused their efforts on volunteering and fundraising.

AREAA held an event called "Together for Tomorrow," which included speakers and a silent auction. Held at a restaurant, attendees heard from an LA county representative, a county assessor and a representative from Housing & Urban development. In addition to a silent auction, the organization also accepted monetary donations.

The CPCU event combined volunteering at a food bank and with a networking happy hour and donation drive that benefited the LA Food Bank. We spoke with Abby Tamura, president elect, LA chapter of The CPCU Society. During that event, they produced over 1,700 meals to help Angelenos facing food insecurity in the wake of the fires.

### **Can you describe the role of the local chapter in assisting the community during natural disasters?**

While our core purpose may not revolve fully around community service, as CPCUs we take an oath to act in the highest levels of ethical standards and to put the needs of others before our own. Our chapter also takes great pride in our home here in the great city of Los Angeles. When disaster strikes, we feel compelled as both neighbors and professionals to step in and do what we can to help and to go above and beyond in fulfilling our oath.

Outside of disasters, we strive year after year to give back to our community in various ways such as volunteering, monetary donations, educational scholarships and professional development.

### **What are some of the most significant challenges your team faced responding to the LA wildfire?**



Some of our members and leaders were directly impacted by evacuations or worse, the loss of their properties or livelihoods. We had to figure out a way to balance supporting our own and being respectful of their situations while continuing our effort to support the community.

As a group comprised mainly of risk management professionals (many in the insurance industry), we are very conscious of the stigma around insurance and claims. This does provide a bit of a challenge with the public, especially in instances of catastrophic losses. We hope in all our efforts to act as agents of service, education and outreach to our community and stand as positive examples in the industry.

### **How do you ensure your assistance reaches marginalized or underserved populations in the community during a disaster?**

We do our best to find organizations to partner with that have a demonstrated history and ability to reach those who need it most, while at the same time reaching as many as possible. Volunteering with the Food Bank made sense to us in our efforts to impact LA residents who were affected by the fires and provided additional support to an organization already focused on providing the most basic of all needs to a community that even before the fires, has record levels of hunger.

### **Does your chapter collaborate with other professional associations, non-profits or government organizations during disaster response?**

We work with our sister chapters, other professional organizations and educational institutions whenever we can. We have established connections that we utilize, and we rely on the diverse networks of our leadership and members to connect in new and meaningful ways.

### **Questions to help a chapter determine its role in disaster planning & recovery**

The initial chapter response may be to try to help everywhere and support everyone. But the role a chapter plays in providing disaster resources depends on multiple factors, including expertise, capacity and available funding.

Rather than leaving your chapter's response to last-minute planning, which can leave your board feeling overwhelmed with making decisions right before or during a disaster, a disaster planning and response committee can help you start planning early.



To determine where you can best help, consider the following questions:

1. What disasters could happen in your area?
2. Who will be impacted in your chapter and your community?
3. Who will respond to a disaster from your chapter?
4. What are the key tasks you should prioritize for before, during and after?
5. Where will your members go before, during and after a disaster?
6. When should you notify members of an impending disaster? And how will you stay in touch with them?
7. Why should your chapter respond?
8. How will you educate members and prepare them to react?
9. What specific initiatives or programs are already in place that could provide relief to affected individuals and families? Where do you see gaps?
10. Could the chapter collaborate with other professional associations, non-profits, or government organizations during disaster response? If so, how?

### **Remember your chapter's own disaster recovery plan**

When you plan for disaster recovery in your community don't forget the plan for your chapter, so you can effectively prepare, respond and recover from a natural disaster while helping your community stay safe and get back on their feet.

Whatever path your chapter takes to disaster response, be sure it includes a safe space for members whether that's providing the help they need or giving them a space to get away from all the noise that comes with a disaster.

